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Donald William Peckham

Second Language Acquisition Digital Teaching Materials: Unit 1

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Szegedi Tudományegyetem

Cím: 6720 Szeged, Dugonics tér 13.

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Second Language Acquisition Digital Teaching Materials: Unit 1

Don Peckham, peckham@lit.u-szeged.hu

Department of English Language Teacher Education and Applied Linguistics

Institute of English and American Studies

University of Szeged

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

UNIT #1: GETTING STARTED THINKING ABOUT SLA

1.1 WHAT WE'LL COVER IN THIS UNIT

In this unit, we will explore how your own personal experience of language learning can be applied to understanding key issues of SLA. The tremendous amount of experience that you have will be emphasized, and we'll also have a look at the kind of information, ideas, and perspectives that a field of research like SLA can bring to bear on our own experience. At the end of this unit you will:

- know why your personal experience counts in a course like this;
- have reviewed your own views on key issues and compared them with others;
- have compared your views with the experts;
- know about important research based on personal experience;
- understand what theories are and why they are important for SLA; and
- have a chance to consider your own linguistic biography.

1.2 YOUR EXPERIENCE AND THIS CLASS

This course is on how people learn second languages and how this formal field of study has developed and continues to develop. The course is of particular interest to people who are teachers or hope to become teachers in the future.

One of the great things about a field like this is that not only is it about the work that we do or may do in the future, but it is also about us as language learners, and one of the important sources of knowledge and ideas that we can bring to the field is our own personal experience as language learners. We all come to this enterprise with vast experience with our first language and also vast experience with learning

second languages as well. And how much experience do you have? Each semester I ask students to write about their language learning experience and here is what an average group of 80 students is like:

Number of years studying English: ranging from 5 to 12 years with an average of 9 years

Number of foreign languages studied: ranging from 2 to 5 with an average of around two.

Setting of where English was learned: almost to a number, students have extensive experience learning English in schools in Hungary. That can mean that students have had more than a thousand hours of in-class instruction, plus thousands of hours of experience with homework, and for many students, more thousands of hours of actually using English in a range of situations from watching videos, reading and on-line gaming, to traveling abroad, sometimes to English-speaking countries. Indeed, if you're like most students who attend this class, the vast majority of your experience in actually speaking or writing to people in English has happened between you and other non-native speakers. That is, most of the experience you've had has been with using English as a lingua franca, something that we'll talk about later in the class.

Future plans involving English and other foreign languages: about three-quarters of each class plans to become English teachers, while others note that they are interested in business English and translation studies. The actual truth is that at the moment the majority of students probably don't exactly know what they will be doing with their language skills (at least that's what a study done some time ago has shown: Kormos et al. 2002), but it is almost for certain that the majority of you will be "language professionals" and certainly all will have English and other foreign languages available to use in professional and everyday experiences.

Thus, you have enormous experience with language learning, you have sophisticated knowledge of language, and you have a future ahead of you where foreign languages will play a key role. In a sense, then, you begin this class as experts who will now start the formal study of this field of language acquisition. It's my hope that you can bring your personal experience to this course as a starting point for understanding the field and possibly doing research later.

1.3 MATCHING OUR EXPERIENCE TO KEY ISSUES IN SLA

First let's have a look at the set of ideas, opinions and views that you have developed over your years of study and experience. Your views, and the views of others who are not yet well-versed in the professional literature might be considered to be "**folk linguistic**" views. The field of folk linguistics has been studied by the sociolinguist Dennis Preston, who notes that the field covers a variety of areas from language attitudes to lay people's ideas concerning language and learning. It's this second area that concerns us, and so let's begin by having a look at the ideas that you have concerning language and learning.

The textbook that we are using for this class, Lightbown and Spada's *How Languages are Learned* (2013), begins with a survey of reader's knowledge, and let's take a look at this to begin with. The survey covers 18 commonly held ideas concerning language learning.

READING TASK: EXPLORING YOUR OWN VIEWS ON SLA

Below, you'll find the survey of popular ideas about language learning and teaching. Consider the extent to which you agree with each statement by marking an X in the appropriate box based on whether you "strongly agree", "agree", "disagree" or "strongly disagree". You'll need to keep track of your answers on a separate sheet of paper.

	SA	A	D	SD
1. Languages are learned mainly through imitation.				
2 Parents usually correct young children when they make grammatical errors.				
3 Highly intelligent people are good language learners.				
4 The most important predictor of success in second language acquisition is motivation.				
5 The earlier a second language is introduced in school programmes, the greater the likelihood of success in learning.				
6 Most of the mistakes that second language learners make are due to interference from their first language.				
7 The best way to learn new vocabulary is through reading.				
8 It is essential for learners to be able to pronounce all the individual sounds in the second language.				
9 Once learners know roughly 1 000 words and the basic structure of a language, they can easily participate in conversations with native speakers.				
10 Teachers should present grammatical rules one at a time, and learners should practise examples of each one before going on to another.				
11 Teachers should teach simple language structures before complex ones.				
12 Learners' errors should be corrected as soon as they are made in order to prevent the formation of bad habits.				
13 Teachers should use materials that expose students to only those language structures they have already been taught.				
14 When learners are allowed to interact freely (for example, in group or pair activities), they copy each other's mistakes.				
15 Students learn what they are taught.				
16 Teachers should respond to students' errors by correctly rephrasing what they have said rather than by explicitly pointing out the error.				

17 Students can learn both language and academic content (for example, science and history) simultaneously in classes where the subject matter is taught in their second language.				
18. Classrooms are good places to learn about language but not for knowing how to use language.				

You probably have pretty clear opinions about almost all of the issues in this survey based on the vast personal experience that you've accumulated over the years. This is great since these are the exact issues that the course will cover in during the semester. As a first step towards looking at your views more closely, let's have a look at how a previous class of 80 students have answered these questions.

READING TASK: COMPARE YOUR SURVEY ANSWER TO OTHER STUDENTS

For each answer, I've marked the number of people who have scored at each point on the scale. Take a look at these answers and see how they compare to your answers? Why is there such variation in answers?

	SA	A	D	SD
1. Languages are learned mainly through imitation.	7	37	15	0
2 Parents usually correct young children when they make grammatical errors.	22	30	6	1
3 Highly intelligent people are good language learners.	1	29	25	4
4 The most important predictor of success in second language acquisition is motivation.	25	27	7	0
5 The earlier a second language is introduced in school programmes, the greater the likelihood of success in learning.	25	25	8	1
6 Most of the mistakes that second language learners make are due to interference from their first language.	14	35	9	2
7 The best way to learn new vocabulary is through reading.	12	30	9	3
8 It is essential for learners to be able to pronounce all the individual sounds in the second language.	5	23	27	4
9 Once learners know roughly 1 000 words and the basic structure of a language, they can easily participate in conversations with native speakers.	6	18	32	3
10 Teachers should present grammatical rules one at a time, and learners should practise examples of each one before going on to another.	17	42	0	0

11 Teachers should teach simple language structures before complex ones.	35	22	2	0
12 Learners' errors should be corrected as soon as they are made in order to prevent the formation of bad habits.	18	32	9	0
13 Teachers should use materials that expose students to only those language structures they have already been taught.	1	19	32	7
14 When learners are allowed to interact freely (for example, in group or pair activities), they copy each other's mistakes.	2	15	35	5
15 Students learn what they are taught.	3	20	34	7
16 Teachers should respond to students' errors by correctly rephrasing what they have said rather than by explicitly pointing out the error.	41	18	0	0
17 Students can learn both language and academic content (for example, science and history) simultaneously in classes where the subject matter is taught in their second language.	23	36	1	0
18. Classrooms are good places to learn about language but not for knowing how to use language.	2	12	39	7

One startling thing that is immediately noticeable is that there is huge variation in the answers. Every possible answer is answered for many of the questions, and for some questions there are nearly equal numbers of responses across the agree and disagree divide (such as for question 3 on intelligence and language learning). Though, there are cases of rather clear agreement, such as in question 11 on whether simple structures should be taught before complex ones.

What on earth can this mean? How can people with such vast experience come to such different conclusions. Well, I think that two points need to be made here. First most all of the questions are asking about quite complex issues which can be approached from various points of view. We'll see that some of these issues – such as the best age beginning to study a foreign language – are highly complex and have legitimate competing and conflicting sides to them. Thus, it's not surprising that people have conflicting views. Second, even though the personal experience of the groups of students who take the class each year is generally the same, we all take away different lessons from our experience and indeed there is tremendous amount of individual variation across students in the group and within each of us in our lifetimes as language learners. Given this it makes sense to see this amount of variation in the answers.

But, what is it that a course like this can bring to us? What new things can it teach us if we already have such clearly defined views on the key issues of the field? Let's investigate this by looking in depth at the answer provided in our textbook to one of these issues. In general by looking at the answers from the book we'll be able to see what kind of additional knowledge and ideas can be brought to bear on these issues beyond personal experience.

1.4 LOOKING AT HOW EXPERTS IN THE FIELD APPROACH THE SAME ISSUES – AN EXAMPLE

Consider your reasoning behind your answer to the first statement, that languages are learned mainly through imitation. What formed the basis of your view? Let's then look at the explanation given in our textbook, *How Languages are Learned*, for this first point.

READING TASK: SEEING HOW EXPERTS UNDERSTAND KEY ISSUES

While you read the following section, look for the answers to the following questions:

- What is the main evidence the authors bring to support their answer?
- Where does this evidence come from?
- How is their answer different than yours?

*1 Languages are learned mainly through **imitation***

It is difficult to find support for the argument that languages are learned mainly through imitation. For one thing, learners produce many novel sentences that they could not have heard before. These sentences are based on their developing understanding of how the language system works. This is evident in children's sentences such as 'I'm hiccing up an I can't stop', and 'It was upside down but I turned it upside right', and with second language learners who say 'The cowboy rided into town', or 'The man that I spoke to him is angry'. These examples and many others provide evidence that language learners do not simply internalize a great list of imitated and memorized sentences. They also identify patterns in the language and extend them to new contexts.

If we use a narrow definition of imitation (the immediate repetition of all or part of another speaker's utterance) we find that some children imitate a great deal as they acquire their first language. Even these children, however, do not imitate everything they hear. Instead, they selectively imitate certain words or structures that they are in the process of learning. Furthermore, children who do little overt imitation learn language as quickly and as well as those who imitate more. Thus this type of imitation may be an individual learning strategy but it is not a universal characteristic of language learners.

Some second language learners also find it useful to imitate samples of the new language Classroom researchers have observed students who repeat what they hear others say, and some advanced learners who are determined to improve their pronunciation find it helpful to spend time carefully listening to and imitating language in a language laboratory or tutorial. However, for beginning learners, the imitation and rote memorization that characterizes audiolingual approaches to language teaching is not effective if learners do not also use the sentences and phrases they are practicing in meaningful interaction. Learners need to so more than recite bits of accurate language in drills and dialogues.

Nevertheless, recent findings from corpus linguistics have provided a new appreciation for formulaic language use. We know from the discussion of usage-based theories discussed in Chapter 4 that a great deal of natural language use is predictable on the basis of the frequency with which words or phrases occur together. Learners create strong associations between language features that tend to occur together. Thus, language is partly learned in chunks larger than single words. However, this internalization of the input does not depend on the learner's imitation of all or part of another person's utterance in rote-repetition fashion. It is the combined exposure to language teaches in the input and their use in meaningful exchanges that lead to learning.

–Lightbown & Spada 2013:201-202

What does this text give us that we didn't know before? There are two points here. First of all, it gives us more detailed information on this topic than you might have had when giving your own opinion based on your experience. That is, there's more complete information here. Probably, you couldn't write a detailed paragraph (yet!) on this topic. Second, and most importantly, the type of information and ideas is different that we might have access to when we give an opinion based on our own experience, as we'll see below.

Certainly, one thing we can see is that whereas our students on the first day of class largely believe that imitation plays a large role in language learning, the authors of the text decidedly disagree with this statement. Let's look at their evidence.

From their answer, we can gather that they are presenting descriptive research on language learning which was done in the 1970s concerning the types of utterances that children make when learning their first language. Secondly, they show that there is variation in the amount of imitation that goes on, yet this variation does not affect language learning. They then use this information to help logically contradict the ideas that imitation forms the basis for language learning.

Next, they report on research which suggests that even if students do use repetition and imitation as a strategy, then this must happen in a context of language use, where language is used in actual communication. This data also comes from research.

Finally, they reinterpret these older ideas of imitation and repetition in the more modern theory of usage-based language learning to show that what looked like an effect of repetition and imitation is indeed based on exposure to language of varying degrees of frequency.

Thus, what the field of SLA can bring to an issue like this is data collected systematically through research, and hypotheses and theories which are developed through this data. With this in mind, an issue like imitation and repetition can be more clearly understood. This is what the field of SLA has to offer.

The point is that we can use our own experience as a starting point and can then expand on it from there. We might find confirmation of what we ourselves have seen over the years, and we may find that our views need to be augmented or radically changed. Thus, we can begin with our own observations about

how language learning works, and then expand them based on ideas from experts who have done formal research and investigations in the field. And, it is important to note here that this is exactly how scientific research works: researchers begin with observations, sometimes based on their own experience, and then systematically read what other people have written, develop their own knowledge, and then collect their own data to come to their own careful conclusions. This is how excellent research is done.

So, one of the benefits of this course will hopefully for us to sharpen up our current views on language acquisition and bring systematic research and expert opinion to bear on your developing conception of the field. This can add value to your experience as a learner, your work as a teacher and the possibilities for you to do research on your own.

1.5 DEVELOPING THEORIES BASED ON PERSONAL EXPERIENCE – ANOTHER EXAMPLE

Before we discuss in more detail what theories actual are, let's look in detail at how the kind of personal experience that I've been talking about above led to the development of two important SLA theories.

In the mid-1980s, the linguist Richard Schmidt spent a semester living in Brazil where he began studying Portuguese for the first time in his life. During this time, he kept a detailed personal record of his experiences learning Portuguese which formed the basis for important theories in the development of SLA.

READING TASK: READING RESEARCH BASED ON PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Below is the slightly edited version of the introduction from his ground-breaking paper: "Developing basic conversational ability in a second language: A case study of an adult learner of Portuguese". Read through his introduction and look for the answers to the following questions:

–What data does he base his paper on?

–How is this data collected?

–How is this data elevated beyond the level of personal experience so as to become scientific data?

This chapter is a descriptive, analytical study of the development of conversational ability in Portuguese by one subject during a 5-month stay in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The chapter attempts to deal with two basic issues: (1) the kind and amount of language that was learned in order to communicate with native speakers, and (2) the ways in which both instruction and conversational interaction contributed to learning the language. The chapter is based on two data sources. The learner, the first coauthor of this paper, hereafter referred to as R, kept a journal throughout his 5 months of exposure to Portuguese, recording whatever seemed on a day-to-day basis the most salient aspects of his learning experience. As in numerous other diary studies, R recorded his experiences and observations only semi-systematically, in

greater or lesser detail at various times, and with varying time intervals between events and the journal entries reporting them. Some conversational exchanges were written down within seconds, while other events were recorded at the end of a day or even several days after the fact. Many of the entries deal with communication and learning strategies, hypotheses being formulated concerning the target language, and the degree to which these seemed confirmed or disconfirmed in interaction, issues especially relevant to SLA theory.

Baltra has pointed out that only language learners themselves can be in a position to observe their experiences, but the fact that we cannot observe what goes on in another person's mind should not automatically lead us to assume that we necessarily do know what goes on in our own (Armando Baltra, personal communication). The weaknesses of diary studies are in general well recognized (Bailey and Ochsner 1983). In addition to being idiosyncratic and of dubious generalizability, what they report is subjective, already filtered through the perceptions and possibly the biases of the learner (especially important when the learner is a linguist professionally interested in SLA theory), and exceedingly difficult to verify. With respect to the processes of learning, these are important limitations, since those who believe that language acquisition goes on almost entirely below the level of conscious awareness might argue that one simply cannot observe oneself learning a language (Seliger 1983; Derek Bickerton, personal communication). Even with regard to the products of language learning, there are important limitations to self-report data. Learners cannot say with assurance when their rules and outputs match those of native speakers, cannot be relied upon to identify their errors and areas of difficulty, and may not even be able to report accurately what they have said (still less, what was said by native speakers) on particular occasions.

In order to compensate partially for such weaknesses in the self-report data, the paper also draws upon the evidence from a second, more objective data source, a series of four tape-recorded conversations in Portuguese between the two coauthors, varying from 30 to 60 minutes per conversation, recorded at approximately 1-month intervals. These conversations were unstructured, and covered a range of topics dealing with biography, current activities, and future plans. The tapes were transcribed, errors were identified, and various aspects of the Portuguese noun phrase and verb phrase were analyzed by the second coauthor, a linguist who is a native speaker of Brazilian Portuguese. This analysis is complementary to that which emerges from R's journal, and in the development of the paper there has been an interplay between the data sources, a method recommended by Cohen (1984). Subjective reports in the journal have suggested things to look for in the recorded data, and phenomena initially identified from the conversational transcripts have often been illuminated by comments in the journal. When hypotheses and explanations are offered here, these represent the combined perspectives of the learner and the native speaker observer.

—Schmidt & Frota 1986:237-238

The authors of the study are using two sources of data which complement each other. The one author's observations of his own learning may not be reliable, and so they are backed up by actual recordings of conversations between the two authors. After this, there was an analysis done of the data to look for connections in what the author observed himself doing and to look for which features appeared in his

developing language. These connections were further interpreted based on current theories and ideas about second language learning. In this way, what began as mere personal observations became the foundation for the development of theory.

READING TASK: EXPLORING DATA AND CONCLUSIONS

Let's pick up the story later in the paper at the discussion of the data. Here you'll see the authors make sense of and interpret the data. Look for their major conclusions here and see how they use data to support them.

It seems, then, that if R was to learn and use a particular type of verbal form, it was not enough for it to have been taught and drilled in class. It was also not enough for the form to occur in input, but R had to notice the form in the input. As indicated by the last journal entry above, R subjectively felt as he was going through the learning process that conscious awareness of what was present in the input was causal. One of the most important questions for current SLA theory is whether noticing features of the language consciously in this way is a necessary step in the process of acquisition or whether, as is commonly assumed on very weak evidence, this all goes on below the level of conscious awareness. We are not suggesting, however, that R was free to notice whatever features he chose in the input. Looking at specific instances of things that R did not notice, frequency in input was probably a factor in some cases, while in other cases the forms were frequent but phonologically reduced and perceptually nonsalient.

—Schmidt & Frota 1986:281

What the authors are claiming to have identified is a major principle of second language acquisition, that of **“the noticing hypothesis”**. This hypothesis states that for any grammatical item to be used in speech, it must first be noticed or noticeable in the input that a learner is exposed to. This theory has great importance in any course on SLA since it supposes that consciousness is involved in language learning, and indeed must be necessary for learning. Furthermore, this theory reinforces the idea that input – that is, what we read and listen to – is vital for language learning.

Also, their observations led to the development of a second, related idea, that of **“noticing the gap”** as can be seen in the following quote:

What we are hypothesizing is that Krashen may have identified a crucial point, perhaps the crucial point, at which awareness may play an important role in language learning: the comparison of nontarget forms produced by the learner with target forms that appear in input. We are not suggesting that any particularly abstract generalization be made, only that the learner must notice the difference.

—Schmidt & Frota 1986:311-312

The idea of “noticing the gap” means that one of the mechanisms of noticing is the conscious awareness of the difference between one’s language and the model that is around them in the input. Said another way, this idea explains how learners can compare their language to the language that they hear around them and thus learn from that. The question, though, is what makes somethings more noticeable or learnable at one particular time or for another for a particular individual? This is an area of on-going research.

Two points are important to make here. First, these two ideas, the noticing hypothesis and noticing the gap, are key ideas in current SLA theorizing and so they will play an important role in many things that will be covered in this course. Thus, it’s vital to talk about them and define them early on.

Second, and more important for this current unit, what we see here, then, are major theoretical developments emerging from the observation of one learner’s experience with a language. To be sure, this observation was done in a principled way by trained researchers, but the point is clear: our own experience can be the source of considerable development in thinking about the process of language development. This is the major reason that it’s important for you to bring your own personal experience to this class. A course like the one you are now engaged in can add to this by providing data, theories and ideas which can help direct and provide context for our own experience as both learners and teachers.

1.6 AN INTRODUCTION TO THEORIES

Let’s spend a moment looking at theories and how they develop. One of the things that we’ll be talking a lot about in this class over the semester is theories, and it’s worthwhile spending some time talking about theories before we begin.

Many times people have a visceral reaction to the notion of theories, imagining that theories stand opposed to what is “practical” or that they are merely unproven speculation which are far away from anything useful. Both of these are misconceptions, so let’s see how we can overcome these problems.

Let’s now take a more in-depth look at what theories are, with the goal of becoming comfortable with the ideas that theories are useful tools in understanding the world around us. We’ll be dealing with quite a lot of theories in this course, and it’s useful to be happy to encounter them.

In paper written in 1987, Barry McLaughlin lays out a quite useful definition of what a theory is. He notes that good theories do three things:

1. Theories further understanding. That is, they allow us to look across data and see patterns which emerge out what initially seems like chaos.

2. Theories allow new conclusions to be drawn. That is, from the patterns we see emerging from the data, generalization and explanations emerge which allow conclusions to be made concerning something about language acquisition.

3. Theories make predictions. That is, with theories we can look at new data and make predictions about what we will find and what will happen in the future. Theories don't just explain what has happened, but give us the tools to predict what will happen.

Let's look at example far removed from linguistics, that of geology, which can help illustrate what theories can do for us. I present to you a fact below in the following picture:



The fact you are seeing in the picture is an enormous several ton rock on a hillside in northern Oregon, in the Pacific Northwest. There is no question that it is a rock and that it is there – this is a fact – but a surprisingly fascinating and rich question to ask is: how did this rock get to where it can be found today? In answering this question, we are going to need quite a lot of geological evidence and, most importantly, a theory of how all of this chaotic evidence and information gives a clear explanation for how our rock got there. To cut a long story short, this rock does not belong in this area, and in fact its origin can be traced to a location 450 miles away across some of the most rugged country in North America, comprised of wild rivers and canyons. The surprising theory is that this rock floated to its present location stuck in a giant iceberg which crossed the 450 miles during a cataclysmic flood on the Columbia river some 12,000 years ago and which eventually melted on this hillside, leaving the rock to remain there.

The point is that no one knows exactly what happened then, but the theory of the flood not only nicely explains this particular rock ending up where it did (that is, it allows for a new conclusion to be drawn) but it makes predictions about what else can be found in the area which might then be explained by a massive flood happening so long ago. And, indeed it turns out that a great deal of the odd geography of the area can be explained by this theory of the flood. And, after becoming acquainted with the theory of

the flood, many of the features of the land a person has seen their entire lives falls into place and are explained by this idea.

This is very much like studying language acquisition: there are countless variables which are involved with the learning and development of second languages, and theories – some better than others – can be offered to explain what’s going on. Oftentimes a good theory can help explain facts about language acquisition that we’ve experience and seen, thus unifying them behind a solid idea – a theory. As we view facts about language learning as learners and teachers a collection of useful theories can help us make sense of this and guide our further action.

DATA ANALYSIS TASK: INVESTIGATING LANGUAGE DATA

Let’s now look at some isolated facts of language acquisition – sentences produced by English language learners – and see how they can be explained. When you read these sentences, consider the following questions:

--What is the error?

--What could explain why learners made these errors?

Facts – examples – produced by English language learners

1. "Alice read a novel a week."

2. "Does in this picture there is four astronauts?"

3. "The girl fell on her bicycle. She looks at his father and cry"

4. "Did you get the letter?"

"Yes, I got!"

5. The dogok barknak. (*unattested* – that is, something like this has not been produced by learners as far as anyone knows)

Why could these errors have happened? Are examples 1) and 2) most easily explained because the speakers did not pay attention in their English classes or don’t care about English grammar? Maybe their teachers in the previous grades didn’t teach well enough or make appropriate demands on students? Sometimes explanations – theories – like these are unquestionably used by people, but, could there be deeper reasons which have to do with how languages are learned? We’ll find, in fact, that the second explanation is indeed the case, and understanding why learners produce errors like this aids in the process of learning. This will be taken up in Unit #4.

Examples 3) and 4) are produced by first language speakers of French and Hungarian, respectively, but why is this? Why do these first languages encourage these kinds of errors? Again, later we'll see why speakers of these languages might produce these errors and how this can be explained by the impact of their first language.

And finally, concerning example 5), why amid all of the possible errors and mistakes that Hungarian learners of English could make, do we most likely never ever hear this kind of construction or anything like this? This also can be explained, once the theory of cross-linguistic influence is looked at more fully. This is something we'll do in Unit #5.

Theories of second language acquisition can help explain the above facts, and more. In this sense, the theories that we come across in this course will help us find meaningful patterns in the data, explain these patterns and then give us the chance to see if we can extend the use of our explanations and theories. And, one of the things that we'll see as the course goes along, is that the history of the field of second language acquisition is actually the history of the development of ever-changing theories.

A worthy goal of our second language acquisition course would be for all of us to end up with more explicit, research-based personal theories of how languages are learned. In the process of developing our own personal theories, our oftentimes implicit and not completely formed assumptions about language learning will emerge, and we can combine and compare our views in a principled way with the data and theories of SLA. A well-worked out a dynamic theory such as this would be a quite valuable tool for us to have as teachers and continuing learners.

Before we go on with the course, take a moment and think about what your own personal theory of SLA is at this moment. Jot down some ideas about this and see how they develop through the semester.

Finally, as a last word about theories, it now become clear why the following quote is not ironic, as some people believe, but actually expresses a truism:

There is nothing as practical as a good theory.

–Kurt Lewin

1.7 DEVELOPING THESE IDEAS FURTHER: CONSIDERING YOUR OWN “LINGUISTIC AUTOBIOGRAPHY”

If our own personal experience can form a foundation for understanding second language acquisition, then formally considering this experience can be a quite useful thing to do. An excellent way to do this is to write our own “linguistic autobiography”.

What's most interesting about the idea of linguistic autobiographies, also known as “autobiographical narratives” (Pavlenko 2007), is that rather than simply listing our most important linguistic

accomplishments such as language exam certificates we have obtained, linguistic biographies encourage us to consider all aspects of our experience with language and how this has helped make us who we are today. This means that we can consider all or any knowledge of language that we have, anything from the knowledge of a few words and phrases to advanced proficiency, which we've obtained in any way, from classroom learning to interaction with others. We can also reflect on where we use the languages we know. Writing a linguistic autobiography like this can help us understand more about who we are as language speakers and users, and it can also help us clarify our experiences so that we can draw on them in a class like the current one. Finally, these kinds of narratives are also used for research in applied linguistics (see Pavlenko 2007 for a discussion of this).

Writing task: Writing your own linguistic biography

For this assignment, write a one to two-page linguistic autobiography where you discuss the languages and bits of languages you speak, focusing on how you got that knowledge and how you have used this knowledge in the past and are using it now. Finally, you might note significant events in your autobiography such as times when you were part of a community of speakers of a language or significant challenges that you met or not met in the course of your learning and using the language.

1.8 SUMMARY OF THIS UNIT

This unit has focused on your own personal experience with language and language learning. Three important points were made concerning this. First, your own experience is an excellent starting point for understanding the field. Second, experts in the field can offer research and theories which can go beyond our own experience. And finally, informed personal experience backed up by the relevant theories and data can be the basis for important research in the field.

1.9 KEY CONCEPTS DEVELOPED IN THIS UNIT

Folk linguistics

Imitation

The noticing hypothesis

Noticing the gap and Cognitive comparison

Theories

Linguistic autobiography

1.10 REFERENCES MENTIONED IN THIS UNIT

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