

Book Reviews

Spanish Second Language Acquisition: State of the Science

Barbara A. Lafford and Rafael Salaberry (eds). Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2003. Pp. 344. ISBN 0-87840-907-6 (pbk): \$39.95, £28.75.

This is a comprehensive and well-presented account of the current state of the field of Spanish Second Language Acquisition. It is presented with great clarity and precision, and students of Spanish SLA will find in its pages a wealth of information on a wide range of topics within this area.

The book is arranged in three sections, entitled respectively 'Linguistic Topics: Products', 'Theoretical Perspectives: Processes', and 'Methodological Perspectives'. The first two sections form the bulk of the volume, containing six chapters and three chapters respectively, with the third part comprising one single chapter on the role of instruction in Spanish SLA. The division between 'products' and 'processes' reflects the editors' concern to distinguish between the acquisition of specific elements of the Spanish language, on the one hand, and on the other, the study of the processes involved in SLA 'from a more global, interdisciplinary perspective' (p. 7) so as to facilitate the task of making predictions about the types of processing involved in the acquisition of a second language.

The chapters on products examine the following topics: phonology; tense/aspect; the subjunctive; clitics; the lexicon, and pragmatics/discourse. A. Raymond Elliott starts his chapter on phonology by examining a number of specific variables that appear to relate to the development of L2 phonological competence, including the Critical Period Hypothesis (where he concludes that 'aside from the few anomalous cases, it appears ... that ultimate L2 phonological acquisition is constrained for most by biological differences related to age', p. 22); gender; affect and attitude, and field independence/field dependence. He then reviews a number of hypotheses and models relating to phonological acquisition. These include Contrastive Analysis, where Stockwell and Bowen's (1965) putative hierarchy of phonological difficulty is seen to be superseded by research which demonstrates that phonemic differences were easier to acquire than allophonic differences, even in the case of phonemes that were very different from those found in the language of the learner (which is the case of the trilled r or the [x] sound); the Markedness Differential Hypothesis, Major's Ontogeny Model, the Ontogeny Phylogeny Model, and Tarone's Continuum. The latter part of this chapter provides a very helpful tabular summary of the results of studies in L2 phonological acquisition.

From among the many possible topics that could be addressed in the important area of Tense/Aspect, Montrul and Salaberry select as their focus the issue of the development of past-tense verbal morphology. They present Andersen's Lexical Aspect Hypothesis, along with observations on later research both supporting and nuancing it, before examining, in turn, generative, context-based, communicative and cognitive-perceptual perspectives on this question. As in most of the chapters in the book, this one ends with a discussion of the methodological factors of relevance to the issue being addressed and, in this chapter in particular, the authors address the vexed question of the possible

influence of the learning context on the complicated task of analysing developmental data relating to tense and aspect.

Joseph G. Collentine's chapter on the subjunctive offers a critical review of this notoriously difficult area, starting with some observations on the acquisition of the subjunctive in L1 and bilingual contexts, and going on to examine a range of internal and external factors affecting FL subjunctive development. He also reviews his own Syntactic-Foundation Hypothesis which suggests that the acquisition of the ability to process complex syntax establishes certain prerequisite developmental conditions for the acquisition of the subjunctive, and reports on research which suggests that instruction which fosters knowledge of complex Spanish syntax (even when using constructions which are not related to the subjunctive) does have a facilitative effect on subjunctive acquisition. In relation to instruction, Collentine contends that little is known for definite about the effects of different instruction techniques on development of abilities in this area, pointing out rather laconically what teachers of Spanish will be happy to agree with, viz., that 'many subjunctive forms appear to elude intake' (p. 91).

In his chapter on clitics, James F. Lee stresses the key role played in this area by what is called the First Noun Strategy, i.e., the tendency among learners to preferentially interpret sentences as having an SVO structure, regardless of whether they do or not. This leads to the misinterpretation of initial object pronouns as denoting agents rather than objects. As a result, 'learners' developing systems are fed faulty data. Forms that are marked for accusative case are fed into the developing system as nominatives' (p. 125). He presents results of research which support this, although the pattern of behaviour in relation to it varies – but the point is that it is a very prevalent strategy, and one which delays the development of correct use of clitics until it is attenuated.

In their discussion of the lexicon, Barbara A. Lafford, Joseph G. Collentine and Adam S. Karp point out that the study of vocabulary acquisition among second-language learners has recently gained momentum although the majority of the empirically-based studies which have been emerging in the last number of years have focused on languages other than Spanish. After outlining the views of the lexicon offered within the Universal Grammar tradition (the lexicon as a dictionary containing words subcategorised for a variety of features) and within the Connectionist model (which eschews modularisation and assumes the existence of networks of nodes which are strengthened over time during acquisition), the authors explore the latter avenue of research further, distinguishing between three types of knowledge about the word: partial/precise knowledge; depth of knowledge about the word, and the receptive/productive dimension. They also allude to the increased recognition of the role played by L1 vocabulary in aiding, inhibiting or otherwise influencing the acquisition of L2 vocabulary. Here again, we encounter research results which will cause little surprise among experienced Spanish teachers, including the so-called Similarity-Difference Rate Hypothesis which states that pairs such as *ser/estar* and *por/para* are harder to acquire because 'the members of each pair are so similar in form and meaning to each other, not because they are so different' (p. 141).

Dale A. Koike, Lynn Pearson and Caryn Witten cover a lot of ground in their chapter on pragmatics and discourse analysis. They acknowledge the enormous breadth of the area and, at the same time, point out that there is scope for much

further work to be carried out in these two fields in relation to Spanish SLA. With regard to pragmatics, they first outline some of the standard theories before going on to discuss, in turn, deixis, presupposition and some of the SLA research relating to Spanish, including the difficult issue of the appropriate use of 'direct strategies' (imperatives or statements of need or want by non-Native Speakers, who are often more reluctant to employ such strategies than native speakers). The section on discourse gives an account of a range of studies in the area, including those relating to discourse interpretations of the preterite/imperfect distinction and the influence of English rhetorical style on the written compositions of learners of Spanish. Other topics addressed within this area are discourse and assessment techniques, and interaction studies and Spanish SLA.

Part II, on 'Processes', starts with a chapter on current issues in the generative study of Spanish second-language syntax by Liliana Sánchez and Almeida Jacqueline Toribio. These authors emphasise the centrality of Government and Binding Theory and the Minimalist Program and then review a number of studies aimed mainly at examining the degree to which Universal Grammar is available to learners of second languages. As they put it, the results variously support one of three positions that are possible for such learners: no access to UG; partial access to UG, and full access to UG. Specific areas examined in the chapter include null categories, clitics, word order and predicate argument structure. The thrust of this research suggests that parameters are not reset instantaneously, but piecemeal, and the studies in question show a pattern of evolution from the study of parametric clusters to an analysis of the mechanisms involved in the acquisition of specific properties, and from a perspective that emphasised the resetting of a clustering of surface phenomena to the analysis of the resetting of functional features and the role played by the learner's extant knowledge of lexical classes. An extensive section on further research possibilities demonstrates the potential richness of certain areas which have not received much attention in the past, including inter- and intralinguistic variation and code-switching.

In contrast to the above, Paola E. Dussias' chapter examines some of the ways in which Spanish second language learning can be seen as involving the use of general cognitive processes, such as perception, memorisation and information processing. She zones in on sentence processing among Spanish-English bilinguals in particular, and she reviews a number of theoretical studies informing this issue (especially the Competition Model of Bates and MacWhinney) as well as examining how a number of specific dichotomies relate to it, including form versus meaning, conscious versus unconscious, explicit versus implicit teaching and natural versus academic environments.

The final chapter in the section on processes is that focused on sociocultural perspectives, written by Marta Antón, Frederick J. Dicamilla and James P. Lantolf, who stress the Vygotskian approach, claiming that 'language activity, including both speech and writing, functions as the chief mediating mechanism for human cognitive activity' (p. 262). They first present an overview of the theory, explaining key concepts such as the Zone of Proximal Development, internalisation and scaffolding. These concepts then arise in the research relating Spanish SLA and sociocultural theory outlined in the subsequent section, which includes an encouraging piece of research on the conceptual networks of learners

of Spanish which suggests that 'it is in fact possible for L2 learners to approximate the lexical/conceptual organization of native speakers of the L2' (p. 269). Interestingly, they also conclude that teaching approaches which proscribe the use of the L1 in the classroom 'risk interfering with the learning process' since, from their theoretical perspective, 'language functions not merely as a means for expressing prefabricated thoughts but as a cognitive tool that organizes and guides our mental life' (p. 278). They allude to research which shows that attempting to develop private speech in a second language can be 'mentally and emotionally debilitating' (p. 278).

The third part of the book comprises a chapter on instruction by Charles Grove, who advocates focusing on particular features of instructional design and specific variables examined in SLA research which are most relevant to methodological issues, rather than on attempting to identify a single, theoretically cogent approach to teaching which would be deemed to be superior in quality to other approaches. His discussion indicates a preference for the integrated model of second language acquisition proposed in Gass and Selinker (2001), the stages of which are listed as: apperceived input, comprehended input, intake, integration and output (p. 290). Grove presents new lines of research on the methodology of teaching Spanish that require development and concludes that 'the enormous disconnect between theoretically informed research and generalized classroom practice continues to pose a serious challenge for the field' (p. 310).

Most (though not all) of the research surveyed in this book relates to English native speakers who are learners of Spanish, and a useful complement to this work would be further summaries of research among speakers of other languages. This could be of particular interest in relation to some of the issues raised in the chapters on generative and cognitive approaches to SLA, especially questions about the mental representations of linguistic knowledge (and of other concepts) in native speakers versus non-native speakers. The book addresses some of these issues explicitly in the chapters mentioned above and in others which form part of the section on processes, although it is also the case that such issues are implicit in some of the discussions of products such as tense/aspect or clitics. The interrelationship between the two approaches could have been explored more fully in the book in this regard, especially in a chapter such as the one on pragmatics and discourse where we meet, for instance, the categorical statement: 'There are no published studies on Spanish SLA and deixis' (p. 163). If we bear in mind the fact that tenses and clitics are deictic features, we could at least acknowledge the work reported in the relevant chapters on those issues, even if the approaches adopted towards their investigation were not avowedly deictic or pragmatic in nature. The authors might also have taken account of some of the research conducted on spatial deixis in a Spanish SLA context, including, for instance, Flaherty and Richardson (1996).

Some of the contributors correctly allude to the difficulty of asserting the acceptability or unacceptability of sample sentences used in research studies. This is the case of Dussias, for example, where, in her chapter on cognitive approaches, she questions the suggestion that sentences such as the following are impossible in Spanish: 'Yo honestamente no entiendo tu problema'; 'Una flor fea creció en el jardín'; 'Café no hay para el desayuno' (p. 239). These all sound like 'possible' sentences to the ear of this speaker of Spanish, as they do to

Dussias, while many sentences used in research tests and presumably unself-consciously accepted as 'correct' because of an obvious structural accuracy, may strike us as highly unlikely to be encountered in actual use. Examples of the latter abound in this book, and would include such as 'Es bueno que hayan venido' (p. 75) or 'La niña la puerta abre' (p. 118). These examples surely strengthen the case for an increased emphasis in SLA on the examination of samples of actual language use, drawn from the speech of either native or non-native speakers. In this regard, it is interesting to note that spontaneous speech data were used by Licerias and Díaz (1999) to undermine the conventional explanation for differences between null subjects in the second language acquisition of Spanish and the first language acquisition of non-null subject languages, as reported here in Chapter 7 (p. 195).

Minor quibbles would include the misplaced section heading in the Introduction which reads 'Theoretical Issues' (p. 9), which should presumably be called 'Methodological Issues', since it comprises the single chapter on the role of instruction, as well as the somewhat more serious misquotation from Levelt (1989: 181), included here as referring to the L1 lexicon as 'the driving force in sentence production' (p. 131), whereas the relevant original text in Levelt actually reads 'formulation processes are lexically driven'.

Overall, however, this book constitutes a convenient single-volume survey of an area which is developing rapidly and which, given the continued growth of interest in learning Spanish, is likely to continue to expand in the years to come.

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