

RESEARCH ARTICLE**Review: Understanding Research in Second Language Learning by James Dean Brown**

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Abstract:

Understanding Research in Second Language Learning is a book about research in the area of second language learning presented in ten chapters: “Understanding Research,” “An Overview of Research in SLA,” “Research on Adult L2 Acquisition,” “Research on Young L2 Learners,” “Research on the Effect of Age on L2 Acquisition,” “Research on the Sequence of L2 Acquisition,” “Research on the Context of Learning,” “Research on the Role of Input,” “Research on the Role of Output,” and “Research on Other Individual Differences.” This book in SLA, like other books in L2 learning and teaching, provides a description of major research areas and its findings. Understanding Research in Second Language Learning should be of great help in developing SLA awareness for those who are preparing to investigate second language learning either for their own needs or for the needs of teaching. While focusing on second languages, the book also presents issues that arise in the process of life-long L2 learning.

The book begins with an overview of research in SLA focusing on what it is and how it is done. Then comes a discussion of methodology, including tools that are used to collect data in SLA research. Next comes a brief account of how adult second language acquisition has been viewed from Chomsky's UG perspective as a way to explain second language learning. Considering the above mentioned perspective, research has been done on topics like whether the L1 determines how the L2 is processed and learned (transfer), whether the input containing target forms facilitates acquisition (input processing), and the role of output in SLA. Models are proposed on how errors are analyzed and what factors affect monitoring and repair of errors. Other topics within the area of adult SLA are whether changes in the L2 are related to changes in the L1 (drift), and whether it is ever too late for an adult to acquire a L2 (critical period).

Keywords: Understanding, Second Language, Research, Learning

Background and Context of Second Language Learning Research

Second language acquisition (SLA) is increasingly relevant to groups of people on a larger social scale. National, ethnic, and language group migrations have changed the demographic makeup of many countries. Accordingly, teachers and educators are now finding themselves in classrooms alongside students who have very different linguistic backgrounds. SLA in such a context has been termed “acquisition in a social context”, noting that a second language (L2), almost invariably, is also a socially foreign language. This situation is of profound significance to each of the groups involved. Moved by the need for communication, children, as the least powerful parties, must increasingly confront relatively powerful adults in a new and socially foreign language. It is no surprise, then, that SLA focusing on children in such contexts may reveal serious obstacles to the process of acquisition in such a situation.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

As a result, SLA research is concerned with understanding how language interaction occurs and what consequences it has for acquiring a second language. Foe-watching (or “foreigner talk”) is of particular interest since it offers a unique viewpoint spiraling between SLA and understanding SLA interaction. By considering how SLA interaction becomes publicly available, it is possible to analyze the interaction while taking into account the particular contextual factors shaping it. The effectiveness with which language learning actually occurs has formed the basis for further developments, initially concentrating on qualification. The new approach to understanding SLA is concerned with dissemination by understanding what SLA interaction is understood to be.

Significance of the Book in the Field

The significance of this book to the field of language education and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research cannot be underestimated. Since the publication of the first edition of this book in 1980, this work has been recommended to graduate programs in the areas of foreign/second language education and SLA. There are a number of reasons for this. First, it provides graduate students with the opportunity to learn about much of the important SLA research that has been conducted in the years since the publication of the first edition of the book. Second, it provides non-SLA specialists with the opportunity to learn about some of the important SLA research that has been conducted, which they can use to expand their understanding of language education and language learning. Third, it encourages SLA specialists to examine SLA research that addresses language education and language learning, broadening their areas of interest and expertise. In short, this book serves many important and useful purposes of interest to a wide variety of individuals and groups.

Much has changed in the world of language education since the first edition of this book appeared. On the one hand, many of the same approaches and methods of language teaching that came under attack in the first edition still dominate classroom instruction in many parts of the world today. On the other hand, the field has matured significantly in terms of SLA research, and greater awareness of this research has become evident in policy documents and interdisciplinary publications in educational management. Within the field of language education, there are more discussions and research focusing on SLA-related matters than ever before.

There is perhaps no other field of education in which greater reliance is placed on research in making decisions about what to do and how to do it than in language education. As a consequence, there is a greater need than ever for the people making decisions and carrying out language education to be aware of what research has found concerning language education and language learning. This book addresses this need, and as such, continues to be an important and helpful resource to the field.

Author's Background and Expertise

James Dean Brown is a prominent figure in the field of Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition, serving as a second language education professor at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa since 1990. His academic journey took him from linguistics and on-site language training at the University of Kansas (MA, 1975) to pursuing language testing at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (PhD, 1982). Brown is also the founding director of the University of Hawai'i Second Language Acquisition and Teaching (SLAT) Program, where he focuses on quantitative research methodology and language testing as part of the Language Learning and Teaching program area. The author's research interests span a broad range of subfields within Applied Linguistics, including general field interests in language assessment policy, and second language learning and acquisition in relation to classroom processes, textbook design, language-testing washback, and unification of second language acquisition evidence. Brown's most recent book projects investigate the uses and abuses of language testing around the world. On the methodological side, he is also actively involved in the design of effective analyses for scaling polytomous item response data via the Rasch model.

RESEARCH ARTICLE**James Dean Brown's Academic and Professional Profile**

Foremost, it is vital to note that the author of the work under review, *Understanding Research in Second Language Learning*, is Dr. James Dean Brown, who is a professor and coordinator of the Second Language Studies Ph.D. Program at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. He earned a Ph.D. in Second Language Education at Stanford University in 1992. His areas of specialization are in language testing, language program evaluation, qualitative methods of inquiry in applied linguistics and language education, research synthesis, and research into instructional interventions to develop English second language proficiency. These make him a literate, competent, and capable author in discussing the topic of the book.

Dr. Brown has taught courses on language assessment, research methodologies in applied linguistics, qualitative research methods in education, second language program evaluation, language needs assessment, and second language education. His educational focus includes research in second language education and broadening research literate expertise among language education professionals. Dr. Brown is the founder of the Language Assessment and Testing special interest group of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and the Asian Association for Language Assessment (AALA). His extensive research and publications on both language testing and research methodology in applied linguistics comprise books, monographs, articles, and abstracts in over 30 local and national professional and academic outlets in the last 15 years.

Theoretical Frameworks

This book starts with a broad overview of the field of second language learning. The first lexus serves as an introduction to the area of professional interest for teachers and trainers of speakers of other languages. It is followed by a review of some of the possible research options and a discussion of why research should be carried out. Nine cognates, terms considered important in understanding research including learning, acquisition, automaticity, interlanguage and system, are presented. They are discussed in terms of their relevance to the area of applied linguistics under consideration, but also on a wider inter-disciplinary basis by comparing and contrasting them with related terms that belong to other fields of study, e.g. sociology and education.

This lexus finishes with some of the grammatical frameworks that inform both research and training within applied linguistics. For each cognate there is an explanation of its function and information as to where it can be tracked down in the wider literature, including some classic studies and applied linguistics-related journals. Chapters one and two seek to show how cognates and frameworks can provide powerful tools for understanding the teaching-learning process in both formal and informal educational settings. It is hoped that they leave the reader with a better intuitive grasp of each.

Overview in Second Language Learning Research

An overview of the key concepts in second language learning research is presented in this section, laying the groundwork for the subsequent chapters. The concepts covered here provide the minimum essential knowledge for grasping the complexities of second language learning and acquisition research and for understanding the studies that will be described in later chapters. A brief description of what a research study is and the various components of a research study is given. The main focus, however, is on research questions, which clearly define the focus of the study.

To set the stage for the discussion of research questions, some general information about second language learning and acquisition research is provided, including the distinction between second language and foreign language, the difference between learning and acquisition, and the four subfields of a second language research area: cognitive, social, instructional, and affective second language learning and acquisition. Each of these subfields is briefly defined and clarified. The term “cognitively based” research is then introduced as a commonly used term in the field. A final component is a brief overview of various aspects of cognitions in second language studies that could

RESEARCH ARTICLE

be investigated in research studies. Since research studies invariably involve the collection of data, some frequently used forms of data collection in second language learning and acquisition studies are also briefly described (Lynn Stockton, 2015).

Theoretical Frameworks Used in the Book

The conceptual framework used to make sense of a research study follows many of the areas involved in actually conducting such a study. These areas are: establishing the research area, identification of a gap in the literature, stating the problem, purpose of the study and research questions, theoretical framework, and the research approach (methodology). Brown focuses on the first three areas as they will lead to the topic which is the focus of the present review. The research area of the book is second language learning. This area can be considered broad given the complexity of the social, physiological and psychological variables involved in the process of learning an additional language. Nevertheless, within SLA there is a subarea that is even narrower in scope which is concerned with individual differences in the rate and the manner in which one learns a second language (SL).

Individual differences have long been considered as an interesting aspect of SLA. In fact, the earliest systematic studies in the area of SLA examined the role of these differences. The individual differences actively discussed in the literature encompass an array of motivational, affective, personality traits or socio-psychological variables as well as a number of cognitive or learning strategy variables that capture the mental processes perceived or reportedly employed by the learners in the course of their SL learning. In addition to the observable factors, the studies in this area have investigated the role of biological factors, notably age and the age-related characteristics of the brain underlying the success or failure in SLA.

Research Methodologies and Approaches

Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods are the three basic approaches to inquiry. Of these, qualitative and quantitative methods have caused the most concern, interest, and debate. Thus, these two approaches are the primary focus of this discussion. Some description of mixed methods is included because it is a popular recent innovation. In addition to providing an overview of the two basic approaches, qualitative and quantitative, attention is paid to various aspects of each approach, including philosophy, history, and recent innovations.

Qualitative methods in education research have been on the rise in the past decade, although this growth has been accompanied by some difficulties as well. In second language research, for example, qualitative studies have risen significantly, yet the sharing of understandings about qualitative methodologies and approaches has not kept pace. In an effort to respond to this gap, as well as to some current hot topics in qualitative education research, hopes to contribute to this discussion by sharing some insights from a qualitative education research study of language learning strategy inquiry in process. This discussion begins with an overview of qualitative research, describing its different approaches and traditions. Then, some trends and difficulties on qualitative approaches in education research are highlighted. Questions concerning presentation, rigor, reliability, and validity are addressed. Finally, some recommendations for qualitative researchers are provided. Package-based presentations have been found to be practical in existing conferences where all participants are invited beforehand to submit their paper proposals which are reviewed and classified into different packages. Generally, two or three papers are presented by the speakers for each package followed by a discussant who has expertise in the topics of the presentations and who will conduct a discussion and exchange with the audience.

Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Second Language Learning Research

A qualitative research approach considers language learning processes to be a complex, indeterminate, and dynamic phenomenon. In qualitative research studies, social phenomena are examined by accessing and interpreting the perspectives, categories, or beliefs of those engaged in

RESEARCH ARTICLE

or affected by the phenomena being studied. The qualitative research approach postulates that reality is socially constructed and each participant's interpretation is equally valid. Qualitative approaches to international second language learning research, much like qualitative approaches to research in other disciplines, are guided by a set of assumptions and principles about how to collect and interpret qualitative data (postulation), by a set of strategies for research design (design/strategy), and by particular types of instruments to elicit and gather data (techniques/instruments).

The major tenet of interpretive paradigms is the need to build rich holistic accounts from a participant's perspective, a constructivist view of knowledge. This epistemological stance embodies the belief that social action and meaning are linked and the processes by which individuals interpret and make sense of a social situation are central. The interpretive paradigm values the subjective meaning of social phenomena over observable phenomena. Interpretive researchers believe in the importance of the subjective meaning of social action, and thus strive to get inside the participants' heads, understanding their point of view and their accounts of social actions. The main objective of interpretivism is to gain understanding of social phenomena from the perspective of the participants themselves. In sum, the main epistemological postulates of interpretive research paradigms in general are (a) reality is socially constructed, (b) social action precedes meaning, (c) individuals interpret the world subjectively by means of categories and beliefs, and (d) any social phenomena can best be understood by organizing rich accounts from the perspective of those engaged in the phenomena.

Main Themes and Findings

Research in the academic field of learning another language tends primarily to focus on the positive. Individual research projects, laboratory or classroom studies, or theoretical proposals may address issues such as aptitude, age, sociocultural factors, motivation, learning strategies, and implicit or explicit learning and the languages learned. These topics are all presented in the same light as windows of understanding into how we come to know our L2. On the other hand, the dark side of language acquisition is much less well studied, let alone understood. The focus here is on describing the dark or shadowy components of L2 learning that have been studied and understood, as well as what remains to be investigated. This may involve targeting the darker factors in research questions out of priorities and implications similar to, but the reverse of, Cooke's research. Those topics addressed here are: linguistic insufficiency, fixed-aperture acquisition, pathologies, eccentricity, and anomalous lexical priming.

With regards to the understanding of second language acquisition or learning research, there are certainly themes and findings that have emerged since initially being discussed and discovered to be of concern within the field. These themes and findings list an overall critical view of the better-understood facets of language learning for researchers and teachers alike. These are not in any hierarchical order of importance.

Critical Analysis of Second Language Learning Theories

The issue of second language learning is at least as old as the Tower of Babel. Nevertheless, very little is known about how the process works as a phenomenon and much less is known about how to facilitate that process. Dr. Brown has been trying to understand the process of second language acquisition and how to apply that understanding to instruction and curriculum development since 1966. Part of his research interest has been to bring together a variety of disciplines of inquiry which touch directly or indirectly on second language acquisition. For nearly a decade, he has edited a comprehensive review of that area of inquiry for teachers. That review has appeared in many editions and is utilized by ESL teachers and teacher training programs all over the world. The newest edition of this review is documented in the book under consideration here. It is bothered by the very kind of review documented here. The review includes every discipline inquiry which touches on the area of second language learning, i.e. cognitive psychology, psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, anthropology, sociology, applied linguistics, and so on. Brown's concern is educational: what does

RESEARCH ARTICLE

it say to classroom teachers who are not specialists in any one of those disciplines, but nevertheless have to be concerned with the issues raised by each discipline? What is needed is a teaching frame from which to consider the indicators of a discipline of inquiry? What inquiries are possible? What inquiry is needed in this area? What theory? What experimentation? What instructional models?

What curriculum development? What appropriateness? What sequence? What social context.

If any single summary could be put on the current state of second language learning theories, the summary would be: chaos. There is neither an agreement nor a consensus among those who consider themselves domain specialists. Each constituency pulls the discussion of the area of inquiry in a very different direction. The existentialist, the behaviorist, the cognitive psychologist, the psycholinguist, the immediately applied linguist, and the modern humanist philosopher, for example, would all go off in somewhat different directions, and give very different account of what second language learning means and what their respective disciplines have to say about it. The chaos is further compounded by the fact that the state-of-the-art theoretical framework by representatives within any of the parochial views of inquiry is by any means a clear state-of-the-art.

Practical Implications and Applications

The immediately apparent real world significance and relevance of the research questions one chooses in that there are, in effect, innumerable research questions waiting to be answered. A great deal of the research done fails to bear upon issues of real world importance. Nevertheless, many researchers devote much effort to examining what seem to them to be esoteric matters having no significance at all outside the confines of the scholarly community. At the same time, other researchers devote what seem to be inversely large amounts of time and resources at finding particularly edge cases that they know nearly no one outside their field cares about, or would be likely to apply, if they did. Nevertheless, it also seems safe to assert that, if one is to devote one's life to the academic pursuit of knowledge for knowledge sake, the means of such pursuit is best devoted to questions of top practical concern.

The later implications for the very future of the second language research community are rather profound. Since the conception of the second language research community in a seminar under Williamson's guidance there has indeed been no concerted effort to facilitate communication among the various groups working on second language learning within the different language domains. With Williamson's transition to Emeritus Professor and his stepping down from such a pivotal position in the cohesion of this research community, the second language research community might crumble, particularly if, as Williamson feared, research effort and post are drastically cut back. Yet it is also true that a road to bringing together those working within the different domains under a common, if broad, goal does exist, if only obscurely so.

Applying Research Findings in Educational Settings

An exploration of applying research findings in educational settings is presented in this section. Here, a few pragmatic applications of the just-discussed research are explored. Although research is often seen as something that must be done prior to and separate from art, here, very recent examples of how art is helping in conducting research are introduced.

The intangible affective benefits of deepening understanding in the SHA areas of language, learning, and culture forecasted in Chapter One are reviewed first and followed by the tangible pedagogical benefits of deepening understanding of four specific SLA areas (classroom SLA), language variation and change, language and culture, and epistemology).

Conclusion

This book has been written for teachers who are exploring the world of second language acquisition research; for language researchers and language learning researchers who are not yet well-acquainted with the research; and for applied linguists who have been thinking of getting into

RESEARCH ARTICLE

this strand of applied linguistics. There is no shortage of books written for teachers who want to learn about research in second language acquisition, and there are other books that provide teachers with good overviews of many of the studies conducted in the field. However, there are few books that explore the thoughts, views, and values of applied linguists across the various sectors who have taken on the topic of research in second language acquisition, and there is little in print that invites many of those applied linguists to articulate their thoughts, views, and values in written form. This book aims to further understanding of the research topic while providing a vehicle for stimulating more engagement with and exploration of the research itself by those who conduct, read, or review this type of second language acquisition research. Reading through the various chapters contributes to three problems. The first is how to approach the research in the first place and how to organize thoughts and choose a topic. The second is how to organize one's large and diverse sources of data. Fully acknowledging the personal biases that are brought to such retention processes, broad thematic analyses highlight the way in which either large- or small-scale concerns can both organize the plethora of inaccurate extra context data and lend overall structure to the retention process. The third is how best to describe, argue, and discuss the analyses and findings. Attention to the rhetorical moves utilized by the authors amplifies how mortuary language is conveyed through distancing tactics. Empirical analyses of the data point to broad cultural communicative perfectionism and epistemic adjustment as reasons.

There have been few broadly themed or integrative analyses of research in second language acquisition since Susan M. Gass and Larry Selinker, and only Meihua Zhai's chapter in this volume assesses the thought side of the research. Emerging from an interest in incipient engagement with the research, Zhai focuses on thoughts about the topic itself, the conduct of the research, and the retention, description, and writing process. These thoughts, and reflections on longitudinal analyses, reveal a number of commonalities that relate to the nature of the research, as well as possible divergences that reflect cultural imperatives attached to its conduct in different settings. Framed within these thematic sets, both individual concerns and disciplinary involvement are addressed, as are state-of-the-field problematic issues centering on communicative accuracy and discursive potential. At another level, the insights and dilemmas articulated invite those engaged in the research to reflect on their own thoughts, views, and values. Reflective pedagogy has been employed successfully across a range of fields and may provide a means to mediate the participation and contribution of scholars in this second language acquisition area.

References

Lynn Stockton, H. (2015). Identity-Focused Second Language Acquisition: A Systematic Review of Classroom Applications. [\[PDF\]](#)