Key Questions in Second Language Acquisition: An Introduction

By B. VanPatten, M. Smith and A. Benati (2019)

Reviewed by John W. Schwieter

Our capacity to learn a language, even as an adult, is a marvellous achievement that is uniquely human. The intrigue behind second language (L2) acquisition (SLA) is on full display in the textbook Key Questions in Second Language Acquisition: An Introduction. The authors VanPatten, Smith and Benati have written an extremely accessible introductory book that, although brief, covers the most important issues researched in SLA. It is an excellent primary resource for students who have little to no knowledge of linguistics, psychology or language acquisition. Particularly important for novice readers in this area is the book’s reader-friendly rather than scholarly tone. This is notable throughout the entire book and in its engaging dialogues, which take readers on an exciting journey from the genesis of the field in the early 1970s to an examination of today’s most prominent topics.

The book contains eight chapters, whose titles are all questions. The eight questions are carefully deconstructed and answered throughout the book. The structure of the chapters is logical and consistent across the text. Key words are set in bold type, and their definitions are found in the glossary at the end of the book. In the main text of each chapter, there are several pedagogical boxes, which are sure to be welcomed by readers. For instance, there are tinted marginal notes throughout the chapters, which provide a sentence-long extra piece of information relevant to the topic at hand, and which help to break up the text – an important element in introductory-level textbooks. There are also ‘Consider this …’ boxes, which give readers
the opportunity to pause and reflect on what they have just read, often asking them to draw on personal experiences. ‘Exemplary studies’ boxes provide bullet-point syntheses of original studies, consistently using the following headings: Participants; Major target items; Materials and procedure; Results; and Conclusion. Each chapter also contains a box headed ‘What about social factors?’, which provides brief discussions on how to bridge the gap between linguistic and social approaches. More on this is mentioned below. The chapters end with a brief summary, a list of references and suggested further readings, and a set of exercises in a section called ‘Following up’, which applies what has been learned in the chapter.

The first chapter answers the question ‘What are the origins of second language acquisition as a research field?’ The chapter begins with a discussion of the linguistic revolution in the 1950s and 1960s, and how the field developed against behaviourist versus generative backdrops. The second half of the chapter leads readers through the birth of the field of SLA and some of its foundational concepts such as fossilisation and interlanguage. Chapter 2, ‘What does development look like?’, provides an overview of the emergence of linguistic features in SLA such as sentence structure and morphological development. The chapter also discusses the variable nature of such development, which often can be traced back to influences from the L1.

In Chapter 3, the authors answer the question, ‘What are the roles of input and output?’ Input and output are undoubtedly among the most studied variables in SLA. The chapter reviews the notion that communicatively embedded input and output somehow affect SLA. ‘What is the initial state?’ is the question entertained in Chapter 4. Since the conception of the field, researchers have shown great interest in what L2 learners ‘bring to the table’ when learning an L2. The chapter synthesises research that examines whether L2 learners initially transfer their knowledge of the L1 into a hypothetical space for L2 development.

Chapter 5 asks, ‘Can L2 learners become nativelike?’ In it, VanPatten and colleagues review (ultimate) outcomes of SLA from a variety of perspectives. Their argument is that the construct nativelike is not all-or-nothing, but that it depends on the specific linguistic domains and aspects of language use that are being examined. The authors then address the question ‘Does instruction make a difference?’ in Chapter 6. They comment on the extent to which instruction of the formal properties of language affects acquisition. This dialogue on instruction is continued in Chapter 7, which asks the question ‘What role does explicit learning play in L2 acquisition?’ The chapter reviews how explicit learning and processes affect SLA.
In the last chapter, Chapter 8, the authors entertain the question ‘What are individual differences and how do they affect L2 acquisition?’ They present a review of the effects of non-linguistic factors such as motivation, learning aptitude and working memory on SLA. Finally, in the epilogue, the authors address the field’s fundamental and original question dating back to the 1970s as to whether L2 and L1 acquisition are the same or different. The epilogue, building on what has been presented in the book, states that language acquisition should be viewed (and researched) as an internal process and set of internal mechanisms as well as an external process. The epilogue then lays out the arguments supporting the idea that L1 and L2 share the same internal process and mechanisms for language development.

Social (and potentially cognitive) perspectives of SLA is perhaps the one area that could have received more attention in the book. Although each of the chapters contains the ‘What about social factors?’ box, this may not be enough to satisfy those who study sociolinguistic aspects of SLA, or those who would like their students to equally learn about linguistic and social perspectives in their introduction to SLA. While the authors state in the prologue that the focus of the book is not on the social factors of SLA, there is arguably room to include it. Many courses that are up to sixteen weeks long would possibly need additional (secondary) resources, as they would probably be able to complete the book’s eight chapters of approximately twenty pages each in less than sixteen weeks. An additional chapter dedicated to social aspects, and another on cognitive viewpoints, may have helped to make the book more well-rounded and an appropriate length for semester-long introductory courses in SLA. Depending on what the reader seeks, the lack of chapters on social and cognitive factors may not matter. Some introductory textbooks include them (Ellis 2015; Gass, Behney and Plonsky 2020; Saville-Troike and Barto 2016), and others do not (Hummel 2014; VanPatten, Smith and Benati 2019). Nonetheless, the book covers a substantial amount of ground in its entirety.

Overall, Key Questions in Second Language Acquisition is a delightful text, which will be well received by students, educators and researchers alike. It offers readers a fresh look at SLA that is well organised, engaging and entertaining. The pedagogical support boxes and exercises encourage reflection and application, and will be very valuable for learning about SLA. In sum, this book is a highly recommended, must-have resource for anyone interested in how L2s are learned.
References


