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RECONCEPTUALISING SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AS A DYNAMIC, CYCLICAL, AND SOCIALLY MEDIATED PROCESS

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Abstract

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has traditionally been explained through linear and reductionist frameworks that emphasise isolated factors such as linguistic input, cognitive processing, or structural knowledge. However, recent scholarship increasingly questions these simplified accounts, highlighting instead the complex, variable, and socially situated nature of language learning. This paper proposes a reconceptualisation of SLA as a dynamic, cyclical, and socially mediated process in which learning emerges through the continuous interaction of input, attention, interlanguage development, output, feedback, and sociocultural engagement. Drawing on established theoretical foundations as well as contemporary advances in complexity and sociocultural theory, the study integrates these perspectives into a unified framework that emphasises recursive learning processes and the active role of learners in shaping their development. The discussion is contextualised within Nigerian English as a Second Language (ESL) settings, where persistent mismatches between exposure to English and communicative proficiency reveal the limitations of input-centred explanations of acquisition. The paper argues that successful language learning depends not on passive exposure alone, but on sustained engagement, meaningful interaction, and supportive affective conditions. It concludes by proposing pedagogical implications for the design of more interactive, learner-centred, and context-sensitive language learning environments that better reflect the realities of acquisition as a dynamic process.

Keywords: *Second Language Acquisition; Dynamic Systems Theory; Sociocultural Theory; Interlanguage; Interaction; Input and Output; Affective Factors; Nigerian ESL Context; Language Pedagogy; Communicative Competence.*

1. Introduction

Second language learning is frequently portrayed in both educational discourse and policy frameworks as a linear progression from exposure to mastery. This assumption underpins many instructional models that treat language development as predictable, uniform, and incremental. However, decades of research in applied linguistics have demonstrated that such representations are empirically inadequate. As Ellis (2015) observes in his synthesis of SLA research, learner development is rarely linear; instead, it is characterised by variability, restructuring, and context-dependent progression. Similarly, Larsen-Freeman (2018) argues from a complexity perspective that language development behaves more like a dynamic system than a staged learning sequence.

Rather than passively absorbing linguistic input, learners actively engage with language, negotiate meaning, and reconstruct their interlanguage systems through interaction and experience. This view is strongly supported in interactional research traditions. Gass and Mackey (2015), for instance, demonstrate that acquisition is deeply shaped by conversational interaction, where meaning negotiation and feedback play central roles in development. In a complementary line of inquiry, sociocultural theorists such as Lantolf and Thorne (2006) emphasise that learning is mediated through socially situated activity, suggesting that cognition itself is co-constructed in interaction rather than individually contained.

Historically, SLA theory has evolved through competing epistemological orientations. Behaviourist accounts (Skinner,

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1957) conceptualised learning as habit formation through reinforcement, while cognitive approaches shifted focus toward internal processing constraints and memory systems. A major theoretical transition occurred with Krashen's Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985), which positioned comprehensible input as the central mechanism of acquisition. Krashen's framework significantly influenced pedagogy and curriculum design across ESL contexts; however, subsequent scholarship has consistently identified its explanatory limitations. For example, Swain (2005) demonstrates that input alone does not ensure acquisition, arguing instead that output plays a crucial role in pushing learners toward syntactic and semantic precision. Long (1996), in his Interaction Hypothesis, further refines this critique by showing that input becomes acquisition-relevant only when it is modified through negotiation of meaning. These interactional perspectives collectively challenge the sufficiency of input-driven models and reposition learning as a socially mediated process rather than a purely receptive one.

In parallel, cognitive-psycholinguistic research has highlighted the importance of attention and awareness in acquisition. Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 2001) provides strong evidence that input must be consciously registered to become intake, thereby introducing a cognitive mediation layer between exposure and learning outcomes. This insight has been empirically supported in instructed SLA studies showing that attention to form significantly influences acquisition trajectories (Robinson, 2011; Loewen, 2020).

More recently, SLA research has increasingly shifted toward integrative and complexity-oriented perspectives. Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2024) argue that language learning should be conceptualised as a complex adaptive system in which multiple variables interact non-linearly over time. This position has been further developed in longitudinal classroom studies that demonstrate emergent, non-sequential developmental patterns in learner language (Verspoor, de Bot, & Lowie, 2011). Such findings challenge traditional stage-based models and suggest that variability is not noise but a fundamental property of SLA development.

Within this evolving theoretical landscape, the present paper advances a reconceptualisation of SLA as a dynamic, cyclical, and socially mediated process. It argues that acquisition emerges through the continuous interaction of input, attention, interlanguage development, output, feedback, and social engagement rather than through any single dominant mechanism. This position aligns with recent integrative frameworks that seek to unify cognitive, interactional, and sociocultural dimensions of learning into a coherent explanatory system (Ortega, 2014; Ellis & Shintani, 2014).

The relevance of this reconceptualisation becomes particularly evident in multilingual ESL contexts such as Nigeria. Despite prolonged exposure to English in formal education, learners often exhibit persistent gaps in communicative competence. This phenomenon has been widely documented in West African applied linguistics, where scholars attribute the mismatch between exposure and proficiency to limited interactional opportunities, exam-driven pedagogy, and restricted use of English in authentic communicative contexts (Bamgbose, 2001; Adegbija, 2004; Omoniyi, 2017). These conditions highlight the inadequacy of input-dominant models in explaining real-world acquisition outcomes.

In light of these considerations, this paper adopts a conceptual and theoretical approach. It synthesises established SLA frameworks with contemporary complexity-oriented research in order to propose a more comprehensive and ecologically valid understanding of second language acquisition.

2. Limitations of Linear and Reductionist Models of SLA

2.1 Overemphasis on Input

A persistent limitation in traditional SLA theory is its overreliance on input as the primary explanatory construct. Early generative and input-oriented models assumed that exposure to comprehensible linguistic data is sufficient to trigger acquisition. While this assumption contributed significantly to the development of SLA pedagogy, it has proven inadequate in accounting for observed learning variability across contexts (Ellis, 2015; Lightbown & Spada, 2020).

Krashen's Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985) remains the most influential articulation of this position, proposing that acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to input slightly beyond their current level of competence. However, subsequent empirical work has demonstrated that exposure alone does not reliably lead to productive competence. In particular, Swain (2005) provides compelling evidence that learners require opportunities for pushed output in order to develop grammatical precision and syntactic control. This shift in emphasis marked a significant reorientation in SLA theory from reception to production.

Interactionist research further complicates input-centric explanations. Long's Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996) demonstrates that input becomes acquisition-relevant only when it is modified through negotiation of meaning. In such contexts, breakdowns in communication trigger clarification requests, recasts, and modified output, all of which facilitate deeper processing of linguistic forms (Gass & Mackey, 2015). More recent classroom-based studies reinforce this view, showing that interactional feedback significantly enhances uptake and retention (Loewen, 2020; Mackey & Sachs, 2012).

Additionally, cognitive accounts emphasise that input must be attended to and consciously registered in order to become intake. Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 2001) provides a critical cognitive bridge between exposure and acquisition, arguing that without awareness, linguistic forms may remain unprocessed. Robinson (2011) and other instructed SLA researchers extend this argument by showing that attention to form in task-based environments significantly influences developmental outcomes.

2.2 Limited Recognition of Learner Agency

Another major limitation of reductionist SLA models is their insufficient treatment of learner agency. Early frameworks

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tended to position learners as reactive recipients of linguistic input, thereby underestimating their role in actively constructing linguistic knowledge.

The concept of interlanguage, introduced by Selinker (1972), fundamentally challenged this assumption by demonstrating that learners develop systematic and evolving linguistic systems that are independent of both the first language and the target language norms. Interlanguage is not static but dynamic, exhibiting variability and restructuring over time (Han & Tarone, 2014). This insight marked a critical shift in SLA theory toward recognising learner-generated linguistic systems.

From a usage-based perspective, language acquisition is understood as emerging from repeated exposure to meaningful usage events rather than from abstract rule internalisation (Tomasello, 2003; Bybee, 2010). This implies that learners actively construct linguistic knowledge through pattern recognition, frequency effects, and contextual inference. Recent psycholinguistic studies further support this view, showing that learners' production practices significantly shape their developing grammatical systems (Cadierno & Eskildsen, 2015).

Learner agency is also closely linked to motivational and identity-related factors. Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) argue that learners' imagined identities and self-concepts significantly influence their willingness to communicate and persist in language learning. This motivational dimension is further extended in Ushioda's (2017) person-in-context relational view, which emphasises that motivation emerges dynamically within social environments rather than as a stable individual trait.

Recent SLA research has increasingly recognised that variability in learner outcomes is not simply due to differences in input exposure but also to differences in engagement, strategy use, and identity investment (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). These findings collectively reinforce the view that learners are active agents shaping their own developmental trajectories.

2.3 Neglect of Social Interaction

A third limitation of early SLA models is their insufficient attention to the social nature of language learning. Traditional cognitive approaches tended to conceptualise acquisition as an internal mental process, thereby marginalising the role of interaction and communicative activity.

This limitation is addressed by sociocultural theory, originally developed by Vygotsky (1978), which positions learning as fundamentally mediated through social interaction and cultural tools. From this perspective, cognitive development does not precede social interaction but emerges from it. Lantolf and Thorne (2006) further develop this argument in SLA contexts, demonstrating that language learning is shaped by mediated action within socially structured environments.

Empirical interactionist research strongly supports this position. Gass and Mackey (2015) show that interaction facilitates acquisition by providing opportunities for negotiation of meaning, corrective feedback, and modified output. Similarly, Philp et al. (2013) demonstrate that collaborative dialogue and peer interaction significantly enhance language development, particularly in classroom settings.

More recent studies in task-based and classroom interaction research further confirm the centrality of social engagement. Sato and Ballinger (2016) show that interactional feedback and collaborative tasks improve fluency and grammatical accuracy over time. Storch (2013) also highlights the role of peer collaboration in co-constructing linguistic knowledge, particularly in pair and group work contexts.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that language acquisition cannot be fully understood without accounting for the social environments in which learning occurs. Interaction is not merely supportive but constitutive of SLA development.

3. SLA as a Dynamic and Cyclical Process

Recent advances in SLA theory have increasingly drawn on complexity theory and dynamic systems theory to explain the non-linear, emergent nature of language development (Larsen-Freeman, 2018; de Bot et al., 2007). These approaches challenge stage-based models and instead conceptualise acquisition as an evolving system shaped by continuous interaction among multiple variables.

3.1 The Cyclical Nature of Learning

From a dynamic systems perspective, language learning unfolds through recurring cycles rather than linear progression. Learners are repeatedly exposed to linguistic input, selectively attend to features, attempt production, receive feedback, and subsequently reorganise their interlanguage systems. These cycles overlap, interact, and recur over time, producing developmental trajectories characterised by variability and fluctuation (Verspoor et al., 2011).

Recent longitudinal studies in instructed SLA confirm that learner development is marked by non-linearity, including regression, plateau phases, and sudden developmental shifts (Larsen-Freeman, 2020). Such patterns challenge the assumption that learning proceeds in predictable stages and instead suggest that variability is an inherent feature of acquisition systems rather than a methodological anomaly.

Importantly, cyclical development reflects the adaptive nature of language learning systems. As learners engage with new input and communicative demands, their linguistic systems reorganise in response to internal and external pressures. This dynamic reorganisation accounts for the apparent instability often observed in learner language.

3.2 Integration of Core Processes

Within this reconceptualised framework, SLA processes are understood as deeply interdependent rather than sequential. Input provides the foundational linguistic material, but its impact is mediated by attention and noticing processes (Schmidt, 2001). Output functions as a mechanism for

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hypothesis testing and restructuring, enabling learners to identify gaps in their developing systems (Swain, 2005).

Interaction plays a central role in this system by facilitating negotiation of meaning and providing opportunities for corrective feedback (Long, 1996; Gass & Mackey, 2015). Feedback, whether implicit or explicit, contributes to refinement and stabilisation of linguistic forms (Li, 2018). Rather than operating independently, these processes function simultaneously within a dynamic network of interactions.

Ellis and Shintani (2014) argue that such integrated models provide a more ecologically valid account of SLA because they reflect the complexity of real-world learning environments. In this sense, acquisition is best understood as an emergent property of interacting cognitive, social, and environmental systems rather than the outcome of isolated mechanisms.

4. Social Mediation and Interaction

4.1 The Zone of Proximal Development and Scaffolding

The sociocultural framework introduced by Vygotsky (1978) provides a complementary explanation for the role of interaction in SLA. Central to this perspective is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which defines the gap between what learners can do independently and what they can achieve with assistance.

Within SLA contexts, scaffolding provided by teachers or peers enables learners to operate beyond their current developmental level. Lantolf and Thorne (2006) argue that such mediated interaction is not simply supportive but constitutive of development itself, as it enables learners to internalise linguistic structures through socially guided performance.

Recent empirical studies reinforce this position, showing that collaborative dialogue and guided interaction significantly enhance grammatical development and fluency in classroom environments (Philp et al., 2013; Storch, 2013). These findings highlight that learning is maximised when interaction is structured, responsive, and socially embedded.

4.2 Implications for the Nigerian ESL Context

In many Nigerian ESL classrooms, instructional practices remain largely teacher-centred and examination-oriented, limiting opportunities for meaningful interaction. As a result, learners are frequently exposed to English in controlled, non-communicative settings that prioritise accuracy over fluency. Research on English education in West Africa indicates that such pedagogical structures often produce learners who possess theoretical knowledge of grammar but lack communicative competence in authentic contexts (Bamgbose, 2001; Obi, 2020). This discrepancy highlights a systemic misalignment between instructional input and communicative outcomes.

From a sociocultural perspective, this limitation is particularly significant because it reduces opportunities for mediation, scaffolding, and negotiation of meaning. Without sustained interactional engagement, learners are unable to fully activate the developmental mechanisms described in both interactionist and sociocultural SLA frameworks.

5. The Affective Dimension of SLA

Language learning is not solely a cognitive or social process but is also deeply shaped by affective variables such as motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence. Contemporary SLA research increasingly recognises that emotional conditions significantly influence learners' willingness to engage with input, participate in interaction, and persist in learning over time.bKrashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985) provides an early account of this relationship, proposing that negative emotional states can inhibit acquisition by blocking input processing. While influential, this model has been extended by more nuanced motivational theories that emphasise dynamic, context-dependent emotional systems.

Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System, for instance, conceptualises motivation as rooted in learners' imagined future identities, which shape their engagement and persistence (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). Complementing this, Ushioda (2017) proposes a relational view of motivation, arguing that it emerges through interaction between individuals and their social environments rather than existing as a stable internal trait. Recent empirical studies further demonstrate that motivation and affect are closely linked to interactional participation and language use frequency (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Learners with higher confidence and lower anxiety levels are more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviours, which are essential for interlanguage development.

6. Critical Perspectives

While the reconceptualisation proposed in this paper emphasises interaction and dynamic processes, alternative perspectives warrant consideration. Some scholars maintain that input remains the primary driver of acquisition. However, while input is necessary, it is insufficient in isolation and must be complemented by interaction and output.

Others argue that interaction-based approaches may not be universally applicable. In response, interaction can be broadly defined to include diverse forms of engagement, ensuring inclusivity across learning contexts.

The dynamic models are sometimes criticised for their abstract nature. Nevertheless, their strength lies in providing a more accurate representation of learning processes, which can inform flexible and context-sensitive pedagogical practices.

7. Pedagogical Implications

Reconceptualising SLA as a dynamic and socially mediated process necessitates a shift in instructional practices. Language teaching should prioritise communicative competence over rote memorisation, encourage active learner participation, and provide meaningful opportunities for interaction. Feedback should be constructive and timely, while learning environments should support risk-taking and reduce anxiety.

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In contexts such as Nigeria, these changes are particularly critical for bridging the gap between exposure and communicative ability.

8. Conclusion

Second Language Acquisition is best understood as a dynamic, cyclical, and socially mediated process that emerges from the interaction of cognitive, social, and affective factors. Linear and reductionist models, while historically influential, fail to capture the complexity of language learning. By integrating multiple theoretical perspectives into a unified framework, this paper provides a more comprehensive account of SLA that better reflects real-world learning contexts. Ultimately, effective language acquisition depends not on passive exposure but on active engagement, interaction, and meaningful participation in communicative practices.

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