

## **Fundamentals of language Acquisition**

**Prof. BIDISHA SOM**

**Dept. of HSS**

**IIT Guwahati**

**Week 07**

**Lecture 031**

Lec 31: Early approaches to SLA

Hello and welcome. We are starting with Module 7 today. Until now, we have looked at first language acquisition, examining various kinds of modalities with respect to phonology, morphology, syntax, and so on. So, now we will look at how does the system go as far as second language acquisition is concerned. So, after one child has learned the first language, after the native language is in place, and any language that follows, whether we have the same kind of system or whether there is a difference, or overall how second language acquisition goes is what we will be covering in this module, as well as in the next module. So, both module 7 and module 8 will be dedicated to second language acquisition, or as we call it in short, SLA.

So, let us start with the roadmap for this module. In this module, we will start with a brief introduction about what SLA is, what it means, what second language acquisition means, and then we will also look a little bit at the early approaches to second language acquisition, second language learning, as well as bilingualism and how it impacted the research. So, initially, how things went and what the historically important changes that have happened in this field will be covered in the first lecture. Lecture 2 will have a very brief overview of the similarities and differences between first and second language acquisition.

Of course, the differences are many, but we will focus on SLA in this module. Just to give you a brief overview of the main differences that the literature discusses, we will look at it in the second lecture. In Lecture 3, we will look at the theoretical approaches and some of

the theories you are already familiar with. We have talked about nativism and constructivism at great length. We will also look at how different kinds of theories have been proposed for second language acquisition.

So, we will start with Universal Grammar. And then in lecture 4, we will follow it up with the functional approaches. So, different kinds of approaches start with universal grammar and then functional. In the last lecture, we will look at the psychological and neural aspects of SLA. This is today, as things stand in the more recent past, let us say.

So starting with the next lecture, lecture 2 onward, we will begin to look at the various approaches and so on. But today we will start with the history, and this particular module will end with the latest research. So, the latest research focuses more on the psychological, neural, and cognitive aspects of SLA, which is how we will have a holistic understanding of how the field has changed and everything in between. Of course, there are many other theories; a little bit of it will also be discussed in terms of complexity theory, learner differences, and so on. So, let us start with Lecture 1 today.

As I said in lecture 1, we will look at what SLA is, and we will also trace the history. So, what is SLA, as in we will look at the premises of what second language acquisition studies basically refer to, what the primary tenets are, what the primary issues are, and what the points of departure for this are. So, first things first, how do we define SLA? So, the definition of SLA is quite flexible. So, primarily second language acquisition refers to the study of the processes of acquiring an additional language after the first language has already been learned. So, any language following the first language is a second language.

So much so that sometimes many textbooks refer to the third, fourth, and fifth languages also as second languages. So, the term second language is not exactly in terms of the placeholder kind of thing; it is not a second in some very strict sense, but anything that follows the first language, which is the native language. So, if my mother tongue is L1, anything that comes after that can be called L2. Of course, now we are also using L3 and L4, but for general purposes, we can refer to all of them as second language acquisition. And for this course, we will not be looking at L3 or L4 in that sense; we will be primarily looking at languages learned after the first language.

So, both the individuals and the processes may be studied from a learner-centric perspective as well as the processing aspect; both are studied within this, and both can be called SLA, that is, second language acquisition. Though the concern seems primarily linguistic, as in how the language structure changes, what are the kinds of parameters that are probably constant across different languages, and so on. This phenomenon, however,

has been studied from multiple disciplinary backgrounds. So, linguistics and psychology, of course, are the most notable of them, but sociology has also taken an interest in that, and within psychology, social psychology, as well as various other fields, has looked at it. The idea, even though we are talking about second language acquisition, is primarily a language issue, but it can be understood and seen from various perspectives.

Because, as we will slowly see, learning another language is not just a matter of being able to speak in another language; it has very important repercussions and also very important interactions with many other mental faculties. That is why it is important. So, while linguistics and most of the linguistics-related fields focus on the structures of the first and second languages, they aim to compare and contrast how the structures are either similar or different. So, linguistic studies will primarily focus on the structures: surface structure, morphology, phonology, and syntax. So, the similarities, differences, sociolinguistic factors, and their results, and so on.

Sociolinguistic factors, such as the conducive conditions for learning a second language and what happens when those conditions are not present, represent a very nuanced discipline; this is roughly what sociolinguistic factors refer to, as certain societies may be more open to being bilingual, while others may not be. And even when society is open to being bilingual or multilingual, the language that is your second language, whether it is L2 or L3, or for that matter L1, might be under scrutiny under various circumstances. We will look at it slowly. But those are different domains. And when we are talking about the psychological perspective of looking at SLA, we are primarily looking at the underlying structure, not the surface structure, which is the linguistic structure; we are looking at the mental structure.

So, the cognitive processes and psychological processes—psychological, mental, cognitive—all these different kinds of processes that are involved in acquisition; that is what psychology studies. And the representation of this knowledge in the human brain. Accessing and retrieving that knowledge, such as lexical access, for example, is studied widely in terms of bilinguals: how bilinguals do that and how, as their language acquisition goes through stages, they become more and more proficient. Whether accessibility becomes easier, why it is so, and all those things will typically be studied from a psychological perspective, and of course, the interrelationship between second language acquisition and various other mental functions. So, primarily, the entire enterprise of the psychological perspective is based on mental functions rather than the language structure per se.

So, why do you do what you do, and how do you do what you do? That is the idea. So, what is the second language? As I said, technically any language learned after the first language is a second language, as a result of which it is quite common to see various languages after L1 clubbed together as L2 even though they might actually be third or fourth languages. Now, so far we have discussed first language acquisition; this is the language the child learns first, acquires, or manifests, depending on the theoretical position you take. First language acquisition is something that is learned and acquired within the ambient environment. So, it is something that the child is born into, something that is already present.

So, it is primarily untutored and informal. Why is it informal? Because, simply speaking, if the child is born, we have already discussed in detail how the child, when they are born, already has a basic phonological understanding of their own language. So, this is how early their language acquisition actually starts. So, it is untutored; nobody is teaching them consciously. So, this is not a classroom situation where first-language acquisition happens.

So, from that perspective, it is called untutored, and it is informal. It is not learned in a formal scenario. So, this is how somebody is simply born into a language. However, the second language has a slight difference when it comes to it. Second language acquisition is often voluntary.

You have to make some effort to learn another language. It might be formal; it can be social. So, in India, it is very common for people to pick up multiple languages without really learning them in a formal setup. So, you might be, for example, living in Bangalore, and you might be, you know, basically a Kannada speaker, but you might also speak Tamil, Hindi, English, and a bit of Telugu, and whatever. So, depending on the kind of social environment that you are in, you might just pick up what is, in layman's terms, called the language.

So, picking up a language is called the social aspect of learning: socially learned language. These are not being tutored. On the other hand, in most cases, you will be learning English in school. So, when the child goes to school, they start with, you know, alphabets and then

simple grammar and so on. So, that is the formal aspect of learning a language.

So, either case will be considered second language acquisition if it happens after the first language is learned. So, there are two kinds of things. But either way, whichever way you go, there is an amount of voluntary effort you have to put in to learn; you have to put in some effort to notice what is happening. And of course, there will be a slight difference between a child learning a second language versus an adult learning a second language. Either way, there will still be some amount of a goal.

So, you want to speak that language. But the child, when they are born, does not have an agenda for learning the language that my parents speak. So, that is one of the crucial differences. Now, it is not only about learning another language, but lately a lot of studies have taken place regarding whether it has any other impact. Fine, you speak another language; it helps you in many practical ways.

So, if you are in a multilingual country like India, learning multiple languages will be beneficial. So, you are going to a different state; knowing the language of that state is beneficial, and it is practical to learn it so that you can get by. You understand the local customs and so on; that is one that is on the pragmatic social side. But on the other side, there are many other factors—many other, let us call them important factors—that are cognitive in nature. That has also been studied of late regarding how learning a second language, or more than one or two languages, actually has a direct impact on the way your brain functions.

So, learning more than one language has multiple repercussions. So, as a result of which there are various kinds of studies from multiple perspectives and these factors. So, depending on the kind of factors, the kind of impact you will have will also have a lot of interaction with various non-linguistic factors, not just the factor of learning another language, mastering it, and having high or low proficiency; those things are linguistic factors. But non-linguistic factors, like age, social and socio-cultural background, economic factors, and so on and so forth. So, there are multiple things attached to learning another language beyond the native language.

What makes you want to learn another language? That is also a very important question to answer. So, what makes you learn a second language might be that you know the answer to this question may vary. So, often what happens is that there is a difference between the

majority and minority languages. So, there is again that India is a very good example for that. In India, the states are divided along linguistic lines.

So, each state has a language. So, Bengal has Bangla, Assam has Assamese, and you know Orissa has Oriya, and so on. So, every state has an official language. Now, the complexity arises when you realize that within each state, there are multiple groups and multiple languages represented. So, one language is given the status of an official language, a state official language. So, in that case, the speakers of other languages within that state will automatically need to learn the majority language.

So, that is one scenario in which you have to learn. So, all the non-Assamese speakers in Assam, for example, or all the, you take any state; you take Tamil, so all non-Tamilians in Tamil Nadu need to learn Tamil because that is the official language, something of that sort. So, that is one of the reasons, one of the most important reasons. As a result, minority language speakers in any state will be automatically bilingual because the official language has to be learned. Secondly, the language for education and employment is where English comes in in the Indian scenario.

So, English is the language of education; it is also the language of employment. If you need to find a job from a slightly broader perspective at a higher level or you want to pursue higher education, either way, English is indispensable in a country like India. So, that is another important reason. In social terms, a dominant language may or may not have official status, but in a given social setup, there might be a dominant and dominated language hierarchy.

It is always there. Wherever there are multiple languages, there is always a hierarchy. So, even in the absence of official status, there will be social status granted to various languages. In that case also, you may learn. Last but not least because it is simply there. So, if you are born in a multicultural setup and live in a society where multiple languages are spoken around you, you will automatically, as is human nature, socially acquire certain languages.

This is very true in cases where there are various kinds of campuses around the country with people from different parts of the country. So, everybody uses their own language, and the children typically, when they play with children from other groups, all learn each other's language. So, that is another one. So, simply because there is another language or more than one, two, or three, four languages in your environment, you simply learn. This

is more true of some countries and less so for some other countries, but these are various reasons why people do learn a second language.

A connected and often studied phenomenon is the idea of a foreign language. So, there are slight differences in terms of second and foreign languages. So, the foreign language is something that is foreign in origin. So, it is not spoken in your country; it is not your own country's language; it comes from somewhere else, typically due to colonialism. So, English in India is a colonial legacy, and it has been left behind as it used to be considered a foreign language.

Now, of course, we do not consider it a foreign language; we have made it our own, and there is a lot of debate about whether you should call it a foreign language or a second language. But foreign language, typically without getting into the debate, is a language that is not part of your immediate environment. It has come from somewhere else. So as a result, the chances of picking up, socially learning, a foreign language are next to zero. So there are very minimal chances that you will pick up a foreign language in the environment.

Of course, today the situation is different. You do not even need to go into the environment, so to speak. You can sit at home and learn another foreign language through YouTube. But even then, the fact remains that this is a different language coming from a different country. It is typically taught in a classroom setting, whether it is a virtual classroom or a physical classroom.

So, there is a formal aspect to teaching. So, there is a teaching aspect of learning a foreign language. There might be many languages, many issues, many reasons why you learn. Often, you want to go abroad for studies. So, you want to go to whichever country you choose. Nowadays, it is a good idea to learn the language because you will need to use it as soon as you reach there.

Many Western European countries prefer you to speak their language rather than to speak in English. So, you might want to learn German before going to Germany. So, that could be one of the most important reasons why people learn foreign languages. Sometimes people might have a special interest while studying in school or college, or you might just want to learn another foreign language.

So, there are various kinds of situations. So, there are differences between the motivating factors for a second language and a foreign language, as well as the way they are learned. Second languages may be learned socially, but foreign languages typically are not. Now, there are various factors, as I stated in the beginning, that there are multiple perspectives from which second language acquisition has been studied and is being studied. Some of these I have noted here, so from the learners' learner-centric perspective, what are those factors that are primarily learner-centric issues? For example, it could be motivation, it could be age, it could be, you know, attitude; N number of things are there with respect to the learner. So, those are factors that are one big chunk of factors with respect to studying SLA as a discipline.

Similarly, the first language of the learner is also important. Why is it important? Because we will see soon that there are various theories about how your first language might impact your second language, So, what is the first language? Is it similar to your second language, or is it very different? So, for example, if your first language has a very different sound system compared to the second language, there might be some amount of time needed to adjust, so to speak. So, if your mother tongue does not have certain sounds that the second language has, there will be a period of adjustment. So, this is why the first language is important, regardless of what the learner's first language is. And this will change if you are learning English as a second language versus learning Hindi as a second language in India; there will be differences.

So, those kinds of things. The environment, of course, includes the ambient languages that are present, and depending on that, you might also have. So, what are the languages in the environment, what kind of hierarchy is in place, and that takes us to the socio-cultural practices and attitudes as well. For example, many authors and scholars have pointed out that having a Spanish accent in New York English, if you are speaking English in the US, might elicit a different attitude from people compared to having a French accent. So, even if both are bilinguals, both of them are using English as a second language, both of them have accents, but because of the language that is their first language, attitudes will be different.

So, this is another aspect that has been studied a lot. The learning method also comes into play, whether it is socially learned or formally learned, through classroom teaching or peer group acquisition, which is also important. Goal, the goal is why you learn. So, these are just some of their features, but there are many more; these are the important features that

have already been studied in this domain. So, not only are these different factors on their own, but they often interact because human societies are such that there are multiple things at play all the time. So, their interactions with these things also give rise to quite an interesting phenomenon that makes this entire field very interesting.

Now, when we say bilingualism or second language acquisition, we kind of take it for granted that in today's world, almost everybody is bilingual. However, that is not uniformly true. Some languages and some countries are typically bilingual; some countries are more prone to being bilingual, while some countries are very seldom bilingual. So, for example, in the UK or Iceland, these kinds of countries have very little incentive or reason to be bilingual. So, for them to learn a second language, you will typically see in the research literature that people in these countries find it less common to acquire a second language.

On the other hand, for example, in many countries such as those in Asia or Africa, these countries are predominantly multilingual, not just because foreign languages are coming in, but because we are ourselves quite a rich country in terms of languages, cultures, and so on. So, we have multiple languages here, and people learn. So, this is more common than being monolingual. In India, finding a monolingual is more difficult than finding a bilingual or multilingual speaker.

So, there are variations among people across nations. Similarly, the setting may impact the way we learn a second language. For example, Punjabis learning English in the UK or Canada have very different purposes. If you know the Punjabis in Canada, you will understand what I am getting at. So, there is a different purpose when you are in a different country; you have a particular goal towards learning the local language, and there are particular domains of the targeted use and so on. That is one kind of motivation, one kind of set scenario, as compared to, let us say, learning Taiwanese for academic interest as a Bengali in India.

So, there are these disparate examples given in order to make you understand how different the simple act of learning a second language can be depending on where you are, who you are, why you learn what you learn, and so on. So, all of these will impact as to what is learnt and how it is learnt. Learning Taiwanese, for example, while sitting here may have a completely different outcome compared to if I were out there in a different country trying to learn their language. Similarly, age is a very important factor. When we study second language acquisition, the majority of the literature is focused on the differences and

similarities between child bilinguals and adult bilinguals.

So, is it the same when a child learns another language as when an adult learns another language? What are the similarities? What are the differences? Why are they so varied? So, there are many different kinds of research that have been undertaken in this domain. So, as a result of this and within the learner-centric perspectives and factors, age remains one of the most important, crucial topics and also the most debated. So, as a result, we have childhood and adult bilingualism, but that is not where the story ends; even within the childhood bilingual group, there are differences depending on when in childhood the child is learning the second language. So, for example, if they learn the second language very early, they might not be technically part of the SLA group. SLA will occur when the child is learning the second language slightly later, say after 3 years.

So, if they learn another language before the age of 3, it will not be called a second language as such. So, there are differences even there. So, we will be discussing all of this. So, in a nutshell, second language acquisition has been studied from multiple perspectives: social, psychological, neural, etc.

, across populations, across age groups with varying L1, and so on. Now, let us look at some of the background information before we continue; until now, I was introducing the idea of SLA to you. Now, let us look at how it came to be, how it came into being, how it all started, and how smooth the journey has been. So, this has not always been a very fashionable domain to study. In fact, it was not even popular; it was not even a good idea to study bilingualism. Back in the 1920s, there were studies, primarily from the perspective of education and policy level analysis, and the focus was on immigrant children in North American schools.

And what was noticed was that immigrant children in North American schools were less successful than their monolingual peers. So, bilingual children in North American schools were doing poorly compared to the monolingual, English-speaking local children. So, they were not doing very well. So, that triggered a lot of research, a lot of studies, and one of the easy explanations that was given was that all these children, immigrant children, were all bilinguals.

They spoke Spanish at home and English at school. So, as a result, they were not able to cope. So, there was readily an explanation that bilingualism was the problem. Why should

it be so? That was not studied at that time. So, for quite some time, bilingualism remained in a very negative light because of this kind of assumption.

The reason these children were cognitively deficient. So, there were tests on their cognitive abilities, and it was found that their IQ level and cognitive abilities were not on par with those of the monolinguals. The idea was because they are bilingual their cognitive abilities have not been developed properly. So, as a result, bilingualism was considered a disorder at that time. It remained for quite some time, and so once there is a disorder, you need to treat it. How did they decide to treat it? Treating was done in terms of ruthless instruction in the majority language, eradicating the invading language.

So, the first language that was the home language was considered the invading language that was causing trouble for the children to speak in English, as a result of which they had to stop using that language. So, they were not like today's schools, where in many schools, children are discouraged from speaking their mother tongue; they should speak only in English. This was done in a much worse way in this particular scenario. So, there was a very no-nonsense kind of instruction in the majority language in order to stop them from speaking their mother tongue.

Now, this was all the way back in, you know, the early 1900s. There were some exceptions as well because around the same time, 1939 to 1949, there was the very famous study on Leopold's child, who was growing up as a simultaneous bilingual, and he studied her language acquisition stages and narrated all of them, discussing all of them, but these kinds of studies were exceptions. But because they were there, we must keep that in mind as well. Now, a change in perspective towards bilingualism happened in the 1970s, something that came from a very unlikely place. Why did it happen? It happened in Canada. In Canada, you all must already be aware that there are anglophones and there are francophones.

So, the anglophone Canadian children at that time had to undergo an immersion program in French. So, they had to learn almost the entire education in French, even if their mother tongue was English; they used English at home sometimes. But in this case, among these children, the bilingual pathology, which means their inability to do well in cognitive tasks, was not found. Hence, it became kind of clear that bilingualism should not be blamed for the problem here, and as a result, this entire scenario brought bilingualism out of the darkness and into the mainstream of research.

Simultaneously, there were many other things that were happening in the 1970s. So, we also saw emergence of multiple perspectives on language processing and acquisition taking place at the same time. So, linguistic, psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, and neurolinguistic approaches were also becoming very prominent at that time. Educational perspectives were still around, but often what happened was that educational perspective was taken after the data from these different domains came in. So, it was a secondary study rather than a primary study because, in the 70s, many new things actually started, psycholinguistics being one of them.

So, many new angles were brought in. So, within linguistics, there are many domains; of course, we will get back to it when we talk about theories, but just to give you a brief idea. Within linguistics, applied linguistics was one domain that looked at second language acquisition quite thoroughly through contrastive analysis and transfer theory, and similarly through the creative construction hypothesis and, of course, the language acquisition device. So, contrastive analysis primarily looks at the differences between L1 and L2; if there are differences, then what are the domains that the child will find difficult to understand and navigate? That was the basic idea behind contrastive analysis. So, second language learning was explained through transfer, where the ideas or structure in L1 will be transferred to L2, and when there is a difference between these two languages, there are problems. Similarly, there was another theory that replaced transfer theory: creative construction theory, which emerged around the mid-1970s.

This one said that one learns a second language by using the same processes that one used for first language acquisition all over again. So, it is not like that because L1 is already in place, you just map the structure of L1 onto L2 and thereby have mistakes and errors. So, contrastive analysis was based largely on the errors that you make. On the other hand, creative construction said something completely different. And of course, the most popular account of second language acquisition is one we have to go back to Chomsky for.

His idea was that we learn language by setting principles and parameters on the language acquisition device, which we have discussed before as well. Therefore, second language acquisition involves resetting some of these parameters. So, these are some of the theories within the linguistic or applied linguistics domain. The socio-linguistic domain, on the other hand, started looking at various kinds of contextual factors for learning a second language. For example, the status of the languages—whether it is low status versus high status—and what kind of hierarchy exists in society between the L1 and L2.

Also, there are different kinds of bilingualism that you might have as a result: additive and subtractive. So, do you add one language to another or whether, when you are learning a second language, it will replace the mother tongue? So, that is subtractive. So, these are areas that the sociolinguistic aspect of bilingualism or learning a second language looks at. The psycholinguistic perspective, on the other hand, looked at a very different domain like the psychological processes that are responsible for language in use. So, when we are looking at psycholinguistics, it will be primarily focused on the mental processes, not on the language per se nor in the social domain.

The focus is in the internal mental domain. So, the variables to study here will be aptitude, motivation, form of instruction, and so on. So, these were the initial processes looked at from the psycholinguistic perspective. And then apart from a broader shift from viewing bilingualism as a disorder to looking at it for its own sake, there were other things that were also happening within linguistics and within the field of language research itself. So, these also have had direct implication for the second language acquisition research.

For one, bilingualism itself has become mainstream. It was not that comparing bilingualism with monolingualism as some sort of afterthought was changed around this time in the mid-70s onwards, where bilingualism was beginning to be studied for its own sake. Bilingualism itself is an important and standalone sort of thing that could be seen. So the more important problem that they thought needed to be solved was first language; initially, it was first language acquisition, but later on, the focus shifted from first to second language acquisition. Also, there was a shift in terms of psycholinguistic research from the product to the processes because, as I said, psycholinguistics focuses on the process. But in the 50s, until the 50s, we had behaviorism, which was looking at the product: what is it that is visible.

And there was a shift after Chomsky came in, and you know, the cognitive revolution and all that happened, and then the focus shifted from the product to the processes. So, the underlying process rather than the visible behavioral output. So, language acquisition among children was increasingly seen as a co-developing phenomenon, a co-developing ability alongside their intellectual development. So, children's development was understood in terms of developing schemas. Going back to Piaget and others, children develop in stages, starting with early childhood when they have the sensory motor stage, during which they develop the schemas of their experiences and so on.

So, this is a result of various kinds of experiences; specific experiences, and as they grow, these schemas are elaborated and restructured. Now where does language come into play? So the critical aspect of this theory is that children's experiences determine important aspects of cognitive organization, which in turn will affect their intellectual achievement.

Now, because bilingualism is also a kind of experience, it is another skill that you are learning; that is where bilingualism is highlighted in the psycholinguistic or psychological schema of things. Because children are creating schemas using them and elaborating on them, they achieve different kinds of cognitive and intellectual accomplishments; as a result, bilingualism was looked at from this perspective as well.

So this is how the inquiry into second language acquisition was shaped in the initial decade. So that is where we conclude the historical aspect of this, and this is where you also come to the end of lecture 1. In Lecture 2, we will start looking at other aspects. Thank you.