What's in a name? Why 'SLA' is no longer fit for purpose and the emerging, more equitable alternatives

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> **Comments from the reviewers**
> ' … very well-written, well-presented, and well-argued, fulfilling the aim of addressing critically an aspect of applied linguistics/SLA about which the author is clearly passionate and challenging the ubiquity, appropriateness and current relevance of the term "second language acquisition"'.
> 'An essay which is at once elegant, eloquent, erudite, critical, creative, and constructive. It is topical while also grounded in a sense of the past, witty and amusing while also serious.'

Introduction

The field of study historically known as second language acquisition (SLA) is undergoing paradigmatic change. This can be detected in a number of sources, including the comparatively recent increase in the use of the lexemes 'turn' and 'trans-' to indicate change and/or restructuring (e.g., the sociocultural turn, the multilingual turn, translanguaging, transdisciplinary, and even these combined, as in the 'translingual turn' [e.g., Hirsu & Zacharias, 2019]; see Hawkins & Mori [2018] for discussion). However, perhaps the most telling indicator of such change is the publication in 2016 of a joint paper entitled 'A transdisciplinary framework for SLA in a multilingual world' by 15 leading scholars in the field (including, among others, Heidi Byrnes, Patricia Duff, Nick Ellis, Karen Johnson, James Lantolf, Diane Larsen-Freeman, Bonny Norton, Lourdes Ortega and Merrill Swain), who named themselves the Douglas Fir Group (DFG) after the hotel meeting room in which they drafted the paper. Published in the *Modern Language Journal* (Douglas Fir Group, 2016), this paper has attracted significant interest and a large number of responses (e.g., Leung & Valdés, 2019), including a whole subsequent issue of the *Modern Language Journal* in 2019 to discuss the proposed framework (Vol. 103, Supplement; see Duff & Byrnes, 2019).

An elephant among the firs

In their paper, the Douglas Fir authors argue for a wider framework for studies within the field that has been traditionally known as SLA to embrace and encourage greater transdisciplinarity among approaches to research and theory development. They offer ten 'fundamental themes' (p. 26) for future research in this field, which recognise, among others, complexity, dynamism, multimodality and multilingualism, identity and agency as key areas of focus. However, there appears to have been an elephant in the Douglas Fir room that neither they, nor subsequent commentators on the piece, seem to have noticed.

Twice in the paper (p. 19, p. 21) they provide definitions of their field of study, and on both occasions, in the definition itself, they avoid the terms 'second' and 'acquisition', opting for a more logical, more equitable and more inclusive phrase:

… we define the object of inquiry of SLA as ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE LEARNING at any point in the life span after the learning of one or more languages has taken place in the context of primary socialization in the family. (Douglas Fir Group, 2016, p. 21, emphasis added)

In the paper itself they use variants of the same phrase 'additional language learning' no fewer than 20 times, also frequently referencing 'additional language teaching', and more occasionally 'development in an additional language'. What is more, this is consistent with everything they argue for: a conceptualisation of multilingualism that not only goes beyond but also rejects the oversimplistic implications of the term 'second', and a recognition that we need to move beyond the overly cognitive focus inherent in the term 'acquisition'. Yet, despite this implicit recognition of 'additional language learning' as the most appropriate expression to capture this new transdisciplinarity, and despite critical discussion of terminology in the field (p. 21), they pass up this seemingly perfect opportunity to propose renaming the field itself, continuing throughout to retain the acronym 'SLA' to refer to it.

In this essay, I will argue that there is no valid reason for retaining the term 'second language acquisition', excluding, arguably, tradition, which is unlikely to be solid ground upon which applied linguists can succeed in moving beyond the limitations and biases of past paradigmatic perspectives, as the DFG, and others (e.g., Leung & Valdés, 2019; Ortega, 2014), clearly aim to do. To replace it, I will propose a choice between 'additional language learning' and 'additional language development' as more logical, more inclusive alternatives. But first, I begin with a historical perspective to illustrate the fact that, for all but a minority of scholars, the term has never been fit for purpose.

A troubled adolescence

The phrase 'second language acquisition' seems to have been first used as a scientific term, and possibly coined, by Wallace E. Lambert in the 1950s (e.g., Lambert, 1956), who uses it to describe 'the linguistic behavior of those who are at different stages of development in a language, where that language is not the only one known' (p. 83). However, SLA studies as a distinct field of research is usually seen to trace its origins back to the late 1960s/early 1970s, when two seminal papers (Corder, 1967; Selinker, 1972) offered important insights into the processes involved in additional language learning.[1] SLA was heavily influenced by the field from which it separated, (first/child) language acquisition studies, and particularly by the work of Chomsky (e.g., 1965), whose construct of competence strongly influenced the (mainly cognitive) focus of early SLA research (Ellis, 1985). Hymes's (1971) wider construct of communicative competence, while a key influence on a second, parallel movement (communicative language teaching; see Howatt, 2004), seems to have been less influential for early SLA research.[2] Key scholars in this field, most notably Stephen Krashen (e.g., 1976), championed the use of the term 'acquisition' to refer to processes of deeper, more implicit cognitive restructuring, contrasting this with 'learning' – used somewhat derogatively – to refer to a different type of explicit knowledge gain that, he argued, could not influence the underlying competence that (more highly valued) acquisition was perceived to change. This argument later became known as the 'non-interface position', and was controversial from its inception (e.g., Hatch, 1979), and widely rejected since, even within the primarily psycholinguistic frame of reference adopted by SLA scholars at the time (see Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991).

By 1994, Rod Ellis, in his authoritative *The study of second language acquisition*, had already rejected Krashen's dichotomy, noting 'no distinction is made [in this book] between 'acquisition' and 'learning', the two terms being used interchangeably' (p. 6). Five pages later, Ellis also acknowledged the inadequacy of 'second' in SLA, observing that for more complex multilingual contexts (generic reference is made to 'many African and Asian countries') 'the term 'additional language' may be more appropriate and more acceptable' (p. 11).

Millennium bugs

At approximately the same time, the field began to experience *fin de siècle* schisms, both with regard to research approaches (rationalists versus constructivists; e.g., Lantolf, 1996; Long, 1993) and the object

of study (innatist theories of cognition versus sociocultural theories of development; e.g., Firth & Wagner, 1997; Kasper, 1997). Among these exchanges appears Rampton's (1997) postmodern critique of SLA for its 'overly hasty pursuit' of universals and native-speaker norms (p. 330), in which he also proposes, albeit in passing, two alternatives to 'second': 'other' and 'additional' (p. 329).

As these scholars emerged into the new century, somewhat battle-weary from these impassioned debates,[3] new perspectives began to gather momentum. In his now-seminal title *The social turn in second language acquisition* (2003), Block devoted a chapter each to deconstructing the terms 'second', 'language' and 'acquisition'. He argued that 'second' could not capture the experiences of more complex multilinguals, nor the range of contexts of much language learning, and that the primary focus of 'acquisition' had become the overly-cognitive information processing model, owing, in part, to Krashen's early dominance in the field. On two occasions in the book, he proposes alternatives to SLA; 'additional language acquisition' (p. 57) and, following Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001), 'second language activity' (p. 115). However, he nowhere combines these ('additional language activity') and seems to be dismissive of his ability to influence change, noting for the first of his proposals, 'I am all too aware that changing SLA to ALA (additional language acquisition) would be the kind of seismic shift that academic fields seldom, if ever, impose on themselves' (p. 57). Given the subsequent influence of the sociocultural turn, and its clear acknowledgement by the DFG (2016), I wonder if he would still bet against such change today?

Also emerging at this time was interest in dynamic and complex systems theory in language learning and teaching (de Bot, 2015). Leading scholars in this field further problematised 'acquisition'. Cameron and Larsen-Freeman (2007), for example, preferred 'development', observing '[a] complex systems view of language rejects the notion of language as something that is taken in – a static commodity that one acquires and therefore possesses' (p. 231).

Perhaps the most impassioned critique of the deleterious effect of inappropriate labels in SLA comes from Ortega (2014) in her proposal for usage-based linguistics as a more solid foundation on which to build an equitable, productive future for psychocognitive research in the field. Despite referencing numerous critiques of SLA, which she describes as 'suffering in its very core' (p. 32), despite extensive discussion of the damaging deficit discourses of 'nativeness' and 'monolingualism' in SLA, and despite herself using the phrase 'additional-language learning' 14 times in her chapter, she nonetheless chooses to refer to her field of study as 'linguistic-cognitive SLA', retaining this term uncritically, even when she defines it as '[seeking] to investigate linguistic and cognitive dimensions of additional-language learning'(p. 33).

Over this period, there has been a steady, consistent increase in the use of the phrases 'additional language learning', ' … development' and ' … teaching', as evidenced in Figure 1, a Google n-gram result that testifies to the gradual increase in popularity of these terms,[4] such that the first could figure at the core of the DFG's definition without apparent acknowledgement by the authors that SLA had essentially become additional language learning in everything but name.

Since their paper, in a response adopting a translingual perspective, Leung and Valdés (2019) move close to rejecting 'SLA', also opting for 'additional language', but preferring the more formally situated 'education/instruction' in their definition (although they use 'additional language learning' more often in the paper itself):

> Terminologically in this article we use the terms 'additional language' and 'additional language education/instruction' to refer to the learning and teaching of a language other than one's own home or community language/s to signal, inter alia, a perspectival difference from that associated with terms such as 'foreign language' and 'second language.' (p. 3)

They note that SLA 'has totemic value at the present time' (p. 5) and retain it to refer to the historical canon only. Following Leung and Valdés, Anderson (2020), in his integrated curriculum framework for language teaching, also avoids SLA, preferring 'additional language learning' (p. 175) as his alternative. Numerous other articles over the last ten years have also made use of 'additional language
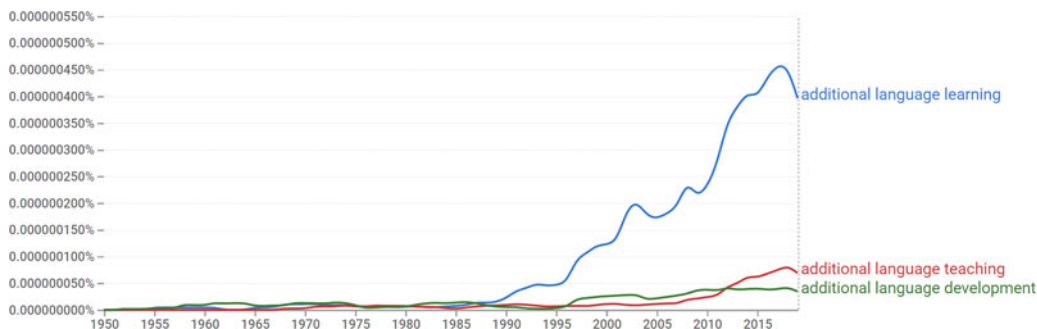
Figure 1. The emergence of a clear alternative. © google books ngram viewer, 2021

learning', it being particularly noticeable in papers discussing the paradigmatic changes that the DFG seek to emphasise (e.g., Atkinson, 2019; Cenoz & Gorter, 2019; Johnson, 2019; Larsen-Freeman, 2019; Li, 2018; May, 2019; Mori & Sanuth, 2018; Ortega, 2019). This shift has been paralleled by a gradual decrease in psychocognitive themes and an increase in sociocultural themes in applied linguistics research in general (see Lee & Liu, 2019) – further evidence of the gradual paradigm shift afoot.

The arguments for the alternatives

This essay aims to argue for change with regard to how we name, and thereby perceive, this key field of study within linguistics. The above description of largely historical and epistemological developments has, I hope, prepared the ground well for my proposal, providing evidence of change occurring almost unconsciously within our discourse community. It is from the same discourse community that I take the two logical alternatives to replace 'second language acquisition' for consideration: 'additional language learning' (ALL), and the less popular, but potentially more appropriate 'additional language development' (ALD). The basic arguments are as follows, many having been made before:

Additional

Unlike 'second', 'additional' can incorporate a third, fourth or fifth language (Block, 2003; Ellis, 1994), and any combination of these (see below). By implication, it is additive and cumulative, rather than reductive, enabling us to acknowledge the increasingly complex underlying proficiency. Importantly, it also avoids seeing learners as outsiders, non-natives, 'L2-speakers'. In this sense, we are all—always—additional language learners.

Language

'Language' still remains at the heart of both alternatives, continuing to be the primary focus of interest, even if our understanding of it is expanded, dynamic and embodied – today we are as much interested in languaging as practice as in language as static object of enquiry. This term remains largely unproblematic and is retained as such in critical discussions of SLA (e.g., Block, 2003; Ortega, 2014).

Learning and development

Both 'learning' and 'development' can today be seen as being more appropriate than 'acquisition', which inevitably implies a solely internal, cognitive process, rather than a wider (e.g., sociocognitive or sociocultural) one. Both terms are also capable of recognising the more complex processes that occur as languaging repertoires change over time, including both 'acquisition' (as gain) and 'attrition'

(as loss), which are part of this. When contextualised within an ecological framework all such changes can be seen as a broader type of learning – how I, we, or even 'they' (e.g., artificial systems) adapt and evolve over time through interaction with diverse ecological affordances (van Lier, 2004). In contrast to these change processes, acquisition, having been borrowed uncritically from the field of childhood/first language acquisition studies, always – if unintentionally – implies an inevitable, cumulative process in which completion (as acquisition) is perceived as the expected norm (Cameron & Larsen-Freeman, 2007), rather than one of many possible potentially appropriate outcomes (Larsen-Freeman, 1997).

Weighing up these two alternatives (learning and development), it should be acknowledged that each has specific advantages. 'Learning' is the focus, arguably, of the majority of research and theory within the field, and of its most common application: language instruction/teaching. It is by far the most commonly used of the two and suffices for the DFG's definition of SLA. However, while 'learning' is also flexible enough to incorporate longitudinal systematic change, 'development' may be seen as more appropriate when such changes are the focus. Further, 'additional language development', if adopted, would likely be condensed to the initialism ALD, whereas 'additional language learning' would more naturally shorten to the acronym ALL (e.g., /ɔːl/ in standard British English), which, while convenient, may cause ambiguities during spoken use. A third term, 'additional language use', while less frequent, brings the object of focus closer to sociolinguistic concerns, and may be integrated into longer, more comprehensive acronyms: additional language learning and use (ALLU) or additional language development and use (ALDU). All these options can and should be considered if the arguments for change presented here are considered timely.

Translingually inclusive

A key advantage of the proposed terms is that they are potentially inclusive of a rapidly evolving and already influential paradigm underlying recent changes in our understandings of language learning and use – that of translanguaging and translingual practice (Canagarajah, 2018; Leung & Valdés, 2019; Li, 2018). Advocates of translanguaging, both as theoretical paradigm and social practice, question or even reject named languages as valid psychocognitive and/or sociocultural entities, seeing these much more as sociopolitical constructs (García & Lin, 2017; Pennycook & Makoni, 2020). A field that is inclusive of translingual perspectives requires a term that can describe language development without needing to 'count' or distinguish in a rigid way between languages. In this sense, 'additional language learning/development' may be seen to refer not to specific named languages, but to the learning of additional resources within a holistic language 'competence', or, as Canagarajah (2018) might argue, the 'emplacement' of additional resources within 'spatial repertoires' (p. 48). Language, in this sense, is used as a non-count noun, the subject of languaging, consistent with Li's (2018) discussion of translanguaging as 'a practical theory of language' (p. 10).

From a translanguaging perspective, the phrase 'second language acquisition' is painfully primitive, capturing everything that is wrong about the monolingual bias that has clouded so much research and theorisation in both applied, and arguably even pure, linguistics (e.g., Love & Ansaldo, 2010). It is simultaneously a relic of prejudice, and an indicator of how far we have come in our understanding not only of language and its development, but also of who we are today – our shared heritage as a more diverse community of multilingual, multimodal professionals investigating language in all its manifestations, developments and uses.

Conclusion

This essay has, I believe, offered sufficient historical evidence for us to question whether the phrase 'second language acquisition' was ever an appropriate descriptor for research into additional language learning. While many previous commentators on the appropriacy of various elements within SLA have recognised that wider change in the use of this term is unlikely (e.g., Block, 2003; Rampton 1997), the arguments and evidence presented above indicate, firstly, that such change may be inevitable – we have

essentially already redefined the field, we just need to acknowledge it – and, secondly, that it is descriptively and ethically appropriate to do so. Names define us as much as we define them.

Endnotes

[1] Thomas (1998) charts earlier precedents, albeit within miscellaneous fields of research.
[2] For example, Hymes is only mentioned three times in Ellis's (1985) overview of the topic, always in passing, compared with Chomsky's (1965) 71 mentions.
[3] James Lantolf recalls, "I still have scars from that" (de Bot, 2015, p. 61).
[4] It is important to acknowledge that Google n-gram draws upon all published books, not solely applied linguistics, and, thus, is an indicator of general use in published titles.

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