

Review of Bill VanPatten, Megan Smith and Alessandro G. Benati: *Key Questions in Second Language Acquisition*. (Second Edition), Cambridge University Press, 2025.

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Introduction

Research into second language acquisition (SLA) has grown exponentially since its development in early 1970s. Understanding how languages work is important for a variety of reasons and this has led to numerous introductory-level books published on the market, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. The aim of this book review is to report and evaluate *Key Questions in Second Language Acquisition* (Second Edition) to determine its suitability as a textbook for an undergraduate seminar course at the University level, and to draw comparisons with some of its main competitors.

Written by Bill VanPatten, Megan Smith and Alessandro G. Benati who are well respected researchers in the field, *Key Questions in Second Language Acquisition* (2025) is a recently published 2nd edition. Differing from its (2020) first edition, the chapters have been fully updated to include the latest research, and the book contains a new chapter on language transfer; namely how previously acquired languages can influence the acquisition of new languages. The book also includes new sections on the emerging fields of third language acquisition, and how a first and second language might interplay with someone learning a third language. Finally, the book has added sections on the acquisition of phonology related to key chapters.

Contents of the book

Chapter one, *What Are The Origins of Second Language Acquisition as a Research Field?*, provides an historical review of the research, tracing its ori-

gins from the early 1970s where researchers sought to explain whether the processes involved in first language (L1) acquisition differed from learning a second language (L2). The authors review early theories of language acquisition, such as behaviorism which claimed that learning languages are similar to learning in general, that is, the process simply involved imitation and the copying of behavior from the environment. However, subsequent generative research founded by Chomsky highlighted the limitations of behaviorism by showing that language did not merely involve copying others, but instead was a very complex system in which humans had an innate internal ability to acquire. For example, children can acquire the rules of their first language on their own without needing instruction, and can produce accurate sentences not heard from the environment.

Chapter two, *What Does Development Look Like?*, examines research on the developmental stages of linguistic features, such as sentence structures, inflections and variances in verb use. Terms such as U-shaped development are discussed; an interesting phenomenon where learners develop their use of some linguistic features by first using them correctly, then incorrectly, then correctly again over time. The chapter also reports on how the L1 can influence L2 developmental processes.

Chapter three, *What Are the Roles of Input and Output?*, reviews the extensive research on the nature of input and output and their necessity for language learning (although less so in terms of output). It covers major hypotheses such as comprehensible input which emphasises the importance of input that learners can comprehend through context and meaning. It highlights the importance of communicatively embedded input, such as input that learners are exposed to within a communicative context. The authors then move onto discussing the importance of communicatively embedded output which relates to using language for communicative purposes, rather than practising linguistic items in isolation.

Chapter four, *What Roles Do Previously Acquired Languages Play in the Acquisition of a New Language?*, begins by reviewing earlier theories such as behaviorism which hypothesized that as languages were learned through imita-

tion and the forming of habits, L2 errors were therefore attributed to learners transferring their L1 rules into their L2. Later research however, showed that this was not the case as many non-nativelike sentences produced by L2 learners were not due to L1 transference but were the result of other personal and social factors.

The chapter then moves on to review recent research on L3 acquisition which contains three main positions regarding language transfer; that only the L1 influences an L3, that only the L2 influences an L3, or that both the L1 and L2 interfere with learning a third language. The Note on Phonology section explores L1 transference further by reviewing hypotheses such as the contrastive analysis hypothesis which claimed a learner's L1 was a major source of transfer and was the cause of non-nativelike sound systems. However, similar to research on syntax and morphology, subsequent L2 phonological research showed that not all non-native L2 sounds were as a result of L1 transfer.

Chapter 5, *Can L2 Learners Become Nativelike?*, explores the term nativelikeness from different perspectives and it becomes clear that native speakers of a language vary in their own linguistic skills thus making the term ambiguous and difficult to define. Furthermore, the authors raise the issue of whether it is justifiable or necessary to compare L2 learners' performance and knowledge with native speakers of a language. This has led to the comparative fallacy claim which states that it is misleading to compare an L2 learner's grammatical development with native speaker norms because they involve different developmental processes and language expectations. This is highlighted in the Note on Phonology section which mentions that most L2 speakers have a foreign accent and are often not expected to sound nativelike. The authors argue then that L2 linguistic development should be evaluated on its own terms.

Chapter 6, *Does Instruction Make a Difference?*, provides an interesting discussion on the role (and effectiveness) of teaching linguistic features, in other words, explicit grammar instruction. The chapter defines two important terms: explicit knowledge (which refers to a learner's knowledge of L2 rules) and implicit knowledge which represents a learner's ability to communicate in the L2. Both types of knowledge are different. Implicit knowledge is uncon-

scious and available for automatic language use, and it develops from exposure to meaning-based input, not linguistic rules. This is why most native speakers cannot explain the rules of their native language. Explicit knowledge, on the other hand, is conscious knowledge about a language and it enables learners to verbalise language rules. Research shows that grammar instruction is only beneficial for developing explicit knowledge. The authors then review a long-lasting debate on the effectiveness of teaching linguistic structures in order to develop learners' second language *skills*.

Chapter 7, *What Role Does Explicit Learning Play in L2 Acquisition?*, covers the effects of explicit learning which is defined as the conscious attention of learning linguistic structures and rules, and to what extent this type of learning benefits second language acquisition. This chapter follows on from the previous one which covered the same topic (attention to linguistic structures) but was related to instruction. In this chapter, comparisons are made with implicit learning which occurs when learners process meaning-based input through speech, not linguistic rules, and how beneficial this is for second language learning.

The authors then review theories that place an importance on learning linguistic structures such as skill acquisition theory which claims that language learning is no different to learning any skill in general, for example, learning to drive a car. That is, knowledge is first accumulated as facts about a subject, in the case of language this could be L2 rules, and this is referred to as declarative knowledge. Then through extensive practice, knowledge is transferred into skill (referred to as procedural knowledge) where performance can be carried out accurately and is available for automatic use. However, the authors argue that this type of learning simply helps to develop skill *performance*, and does not actually help to develop implicit *knowledge*. In the Note on Phonology section, studies exploring explicit learning with regards to sound segments are reviewed, such as the 'l' and 'r' distinctions that pose problems for Japanese learners of English. The results here also lend weight to the limitations of explicit learning with regards to phonology and second language acquisition.

Chapter 8, *What are Individual Differences and How Do They Affect L2*

Acquisition?, reports on differences between learners that influence their language learning success. These are non-linguistic factors such as motivation, aptitude and working memory. The authors discuss motivation as a personality factor, whilst language aptitude (a learner's ability to acquire language) and working memory (the ability to store information whilst performing a task) are considered as cognitive factors. Individual differences such as motivation are well-researched areas in both psychology and second language acquisition, however, working memory has often been overlooked in other introductory-level second language acquisition books, but the authors here provide a very good and accessible review of it.

Conclusion

The purpose of this review was to evaluate *Key Questions in Second Language Acquisition* (Second Edition) by Bill VanPatten, Megan Smith and Alessandro G. Benati to determine its suitability as a textbook for an undergraduate seminar course at the University level. The book is unique in that it presents each of its chapters as questions on key topics and the authors do a first-rate job of addressing those questions with clarity.

Second language acquisition research covers a variety of topics related to linguistics, psychology, sociology, education, language teaching, cognitive science and more, but the authors have used a style that is both accessible and engaging for the reader. The end of each chapter contains interesting discussion questions, exercises and projects for learners to carry out. It also recommends academic articles for students to review that are not too challenging both in terms of language and length. The book also includes a useful glossary of key terms located at the end (as do other introductory books on SLA).

In terms of critiquing the book content, an area that does lack attention (as with similar books on the market) is the role of instruction in terms of modern approaches towards language teaching. This omission is understandable as the title of the book refers to second language acquisition, and not second language instruction. But as SLA research informs language pedagogy (see for example, Ellis and Shintani, 2014; Long, 2015) it would have been useful to review liter-

ature on it, such as task-based language teaching which in itself has received considerable attention in the field over the past thirty years. But that issue aside, this textbook set at a reasonable price for students is highly recommended for an undergraduate course, and even a graduate course on SLA.

References

- Ellis, R. & Shintani, N. (2014). *Exploring Language Pedagogy through Second Language Acquisition Research*. Routledge. London and New York: Routledge.
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Conflicts of Interest: the author declares that there is no conflict of interest.