Talking About Second Language Acquisition

"This is a compilation of fascinating interviews conducted by Karim Sadeghi with 14 scholars in the field of SLA, each a well-known expert in their own sub field. What distinguishes this book is that each of the 14 chapters begins with the scholar revealing their personal journey to becoming an applied linguist before discussing their research interests, their contribution to the field, and what they perceive as important issues and research directions. As such the book succeeds in providing a very novel and engaging expose of key issues and key scholars in the field of SLA – a combination rarely encountered in a book focusing on topics in SLA."

 —Neomy Storch, Associate Professor, *The University of Melbourne, Australia*

"Karim Sadeghi successfully provides a captivating overview of the field of SLA through this collection of interviews with fourteen specialists in specific areas of SLA research. The interviewees first personalize their perspectives in terms of relevant life experiences, then outline their own research contributions to the field, and finally reflect on current and future trends in SLA. Bringing SLA research to life through such a personalized approach promises to be an invaluable source of inspiration to burgeoning and seasoned scholars alike. Highly recommended!"

 —Roy Lyster, Professor Emeritus, *McGill University, Canada*

"These interviews with fourteen minds that have shaped the field of second language acquisition are an intellectual feast and a treasure of historical memory and future-looking insights. Both junior and senior scholars will find this book fascinating!"

 —Lourdes Ortega, Professor, *Georgetown University, USA*

"This book shows how a range of major contributors have helped the SLA field to evolve over the past few decades. Both experienced and new researchers in the field will find this a very useful resource to understand the past, present and future of several key SLA topics. The personal voices of the contributors make this an interesting read throughout."

 —Bimali Indrarathne, Dr., *University of York, United Kingdom*

Karim Sadeghi

Talking About Second Language Acquisition

Karim Sadeghi
English Language Department
Urmia University
Urmia, Iran

I humbly dedicate this work to the Supreme Power, ALLAH, who created 'language and thought' and whatever else is in the universe: YOU made 'language acquisition' such an effortless and automatic process for us as children that, despite possessing it, we as scholars have little information about how it works and are yet to understand its true nature.

Foreword

A new academic discipline needs to establish itself. One way it can do this is through state-of-the-art surveys of the field that announce its arrival and serve as a record of achievement. The state-of-the-art surveys of second language acquisition (SLA) began in 1985 with the publication of my own *Understanding Second Language Acquisition* followed by Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991), Cook (1993), Ellis (1994), Gass and Selinker (2001), Ortega (2009), and others, several of which have gone through more than one edition—in one case, as many as five! These single- or dual-authored books were subsequently supplemented by edited handbooks involving multiauthor contributions (e.g., Doughty & Long, 2003), reflecting, perhaps, the growing complexity of the field and the inability of single or dual authors to address adequately all its subfields. Increasingly, single authors have elected to focus on the specific subfield of their particular expertise (e.g., input and interaction or individual differences), surveying theory and research within that field.

As a new academic discipline, SLA has manifested uncertainty about itself by asking such questions as 'Is SLA a discipline?', 'If it is a discipline, what are its boundaries?', and 'What kind of discipline is it?' The editor of the current volume (Karim Sadeghi) reflects this uncertainty in his introductory chapter. I did likewise in an article I wrote in *Language Teaching* in 2021. There are different positions. One is that SLA is really

not a discipline but just a subfield of cognitive psychology (Doughty & Long, 2003). But this was challenged by the growing interest among researchers in the 'social turn' (Block, 2003) and, later, the bi/multilingual turn (May, 2013), where the emphasis is placed on the role of social context and social identity in L2 acquisition. In the opinion of some (myself being one), SLA is both a 'pure' and an 'applied' discipline. As a pure discipline, it informs our understanding about the fundamental nature of the human capacity for language. As an applied discipline, it offers theories and research that can address social and, in particular, pedagogic problems. The boundaries of SLA are now clearly porous, with very different positions adopted by different researchers. SLA is difficult to tie down, although Karim Sadeghi makes a valiant effort to do so in his Introduction to the book. In practice, however, its porous nature does not seem to matter much as individual scholars simply lock into their particular specialty and get on with their research.

An alternative approach to staking out the territory of a new discipline is to interview key scholars in the field. This is the approach adopted in *Talking About Second Language Acquisition*. It is not the first to use this approach. De Bot (2015) used interviews and questionnaires to collect data from 106 applied linguists and then analyzed the data to provide a picture of how the informants became affiliated to applied linguistics and how they defined their discipline. Sadeghi opted for a somewhat different approach. Drawing on Kunnan's (2015) *Talking About Language Assessment*, a book that he found had greater appeal to his own PhD students than a traditional topic-based approach, he invited a select number of SLA scholars, each an expert in their own subfield of SLA, to participate in an interview, allocating each his/her own chapter in the book. This approach has an advantage over edited collections and handbooks because it ensures a common approach to each subfield of SLA. Each interviewee was asked a set of uniform questions and also a set of questions tailored to their field. Another advantage of this approach is that it personalizes the work of the specialists, taking the reader beyond a straightforward exposition of theory and research into the private worlds of scholars in action.

What then of the selection of the SLA scholars? Sadeghi mentions that he invited 20 to participate, 16 agreed (I was one that, for personal reasons, did not), and 2 subsequently withdrew. Thus, the book addresses 14 areas in SLA. These cover the L2 acquisition of the key levels of language—pronunciation (Derwing), morphosyntax (Gabriele), syntax (O'Grady), and vocabulary (Schmitt). Two of the major subdivisions of SLA are there—input and interaction, which is multiply represented in interviews of Gass, Mackey, and Sato, and instructed L2 acquisition, represented in Loewen and Benati. Current issues in SLA are addressed in the interviews about complex dynamic systems theory (de Bot), bilingualism (Sorace), and L1 attrition (Schmid). The applied aspects of SLA are also well represented in the interviews involving digital technology (Stockwell) and writing development (Rosa Manchon). This is an impressive coverage of the field. Inevitably, however, there are some gaps—there is no expert specifically addressing pragmatics, age in L2 acquisition, implicit versus explicit learning, the social turn, and, conspicuously, individual differences in L2 acquisition, although questions on these issues are posed to other interviewees. There is plenty of room, therefore, for a second book of interviews addressing these areas.

An interesting feature of the interviews is the opportunity given to individual scholars to provide a brief life history. Goodson and Sikes (2001) identified a number of purposes served by life histories. They can help us to answer big questions such as 'Who are you?', 'Why has your life taken the course it has?', and 'What are the influences on your life?' In *Becoming and Being an Applied Linguist*, which I edited (Ellis, 2016), I gathered together the life histories of a number of well-known SLA figures, hoping that in doing so I could provide readers with personalized accounts of their research. Conventional publications tell us about scholars' theories and research but do not allow us to see why they chose the issues they addressed or how their ideas evolved over time. All scholars are shaped by their personal experience and the social contexts in which they work, and their work evolves over time. The life histories reported in *Talking About Second Language Acquisition* not only enhance the readability of the book but also contextualize the 14 scholars' work in SLA.

Curtin University, Perth, Australia   Rod Ellis

References

Block, D. (2003). *The social turn in second language acquisition*. Edinburgh University Press.

Cook, V. (1991). *Second language learning and language teaching*. Edward Arnold.

De Bot, K. (2015). *A history of applied linguistics: From 1980 to the present.* Routledge.

Doughty, C., & Long, M. (2003). *Handbook of second language acquisition*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Ellis, R. (1985). *Understanding second language acquisition*. Oxford University Press.

Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford University Press.

Ellis, R. (Ed.) (2016). *Becoming and being an applied linguist: The life histories of some applied linguists.* John Benjamins.

Gass, S., & Selinker, L. (2001). *Second language acquisition; An introductory course*. Lawrence Erlbaum

Goodson, I., & Sykes, P. (2001). *Life history research in educational settings: Learning from lives*. Open University Press.

Kunnan, A. (2014). *Talking about language assessment: The LAQ interviews*. Routledge.

Larsen-Freeman, D., & Long, M. (1991). *Introduction to second language acquisition*. Longman.

May, S. (2013). *The multilingual turn: Implications for SLA, TESOL and bilingual education.* Routledge

Ortega, L. (2009). *Understanding second language acquisition*. Hodder Education.

Acknowledgments

The initial idea for this unique-in-approach, conversation-based volume, which is one of a kind in the field of second language acquisition, developed out of a similar volume by Antony Kunnan, who almost a decade ago compiled a number of already-published interviews on language testing (in *Language Assessment Quarterly*) in the form of a book. I was long developing the idea to do something similar in second language education. I am very thankful, in the first place, to Cathy Scott, the Commissioning Editor for Language and Linguistics at Palgrave Macmillan, who found the idea and my proposal interesting and deeply engaged with me for almost a year to develop, refine, and curate the proposal further. Her persistence in moving the project forward despite several rounds of review and with some reviewers being uncertain about such an approach to second language acquisition was exemplary and a source of further motivation and encouragement for me. Thank you Cathy for being an influential part of the project: you really are a great asset to your organization! I am also very indebted to the six anonymous reviewers who offered constructive feedback (on the proposal and the final manuscript) which enormously improved the content and structure of the work. Without doubt, the volume would not have started without the sincere and genuine collaboration and commitment of the 14 leaders of the field who agreed to take part in interviews: thank you all for your role in bringing this project to fruition! Although he was unable to take

part in an interview, Rod Ellis had a great part to play by kindly writing a Foreword. Bernadette Deelen-Mans and her production team at Palgrave Macmillan (Kishor Kannan Ramesh, Petra Treiber, and Sujitha Shiney) have all been great to work with. Thank you all! I hope this volume will kick-start further conversations and discussions in the field between other inquirers into SLA and other forerunners.

May 2022   Karim Sadeghi

Contents

List of Photos