Practice in a Second Language: Perspectives from Applied Linguistics and Cognitive Psychology
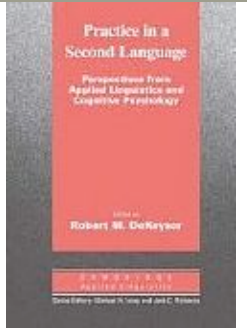
Author:	Robert M. DeKeyser, Ed. (2007)	
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Practice in a Second Language provides a comprehensive overview of the state of the research on practice in second or foreign language learning. To clarify, it is not the practice of second language teaching that is being discussed here, nor is practice treated as the flip side of theory. Practice comes into focus as a collective name for activities that lead to improving a skill during the second language learning process. Practice here is a subclass of learning, whose aim is to reinforce and develop a skill or sub-skill in which the second language learner already has at least a basic level ability.

Although most of us take it for granted that second language learning requires a great deal of practice, looking through current texts on second language acquisition (SLA), it becomes immediately obvious that the topic gets little if any coverage at all. Further evidence that practice in learning a second language (as a research topic) has been ignored by applied linguists is that there is no other book or journal issue to which this volume compares. DeKeyser's book makes a significant attempt to restore the topic of practice to scientific inquiry.

At least two reasons could explain applied linguists' unfortunate avoidance of studying practice. One reason is its strong association with behaviorist language learning theory in general, and the drills of the outdated audiolingual method in particular. The second reason is that nativist SLA theory has little need for the concept of practice. (If the goal of language acquisition is to develop linguistic competence and this competence is the product of an internal language faculty setting its parameters to be congruent with the incoming language data, then what need is

there for practice?) From a nativist point of view, the only role practice may serve is to improve language performance, which is of marginal importance to language acquisition theory. DeKeyser reminds us, however, that practice has been of central importance in other skill acquisition domains in both cognitive and educational psychology. In cognitive psychology, Anderson's adaptive control of thought (ACT) theory (1993, 2000) is centered on practice being the driving force behind skill acquisition, being the vehicle that can transform declarative knowledge to procedural, to automatized knowledge. In educational psychology, Ericsson and his colleagues (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993; Ericsson & Charness, 1994; Ericsson, 1996) have demonstrated the effect of deliberate practice in developing expert skills in a wide range of domains. DeKeyser, who views second language learning as essentially skill acquisition, makes an important attempt in this volume to reclaim the good name of practice in second language learning and bring practice into the focus of future research.

The book contains ten review articles produced specifically for this volume by leading applied linguists. The articles are framed by DeKeyser's introduction and conclusion, two position papers on the role of practice in skill acquisition and SLA research, and the future direction of practice research, respectively. The ten review articles are grouped into three parts. The contributions in the first part deal with general aspects of practice which are not dependent on the context of language learning and differences between learners: receptive practice, output practice, interactive practice, and feedback during practice. The articles in the second part examine practice in specific learning contexts: bilingual immersion programs, second language classrooms, foreign language classrooms, and study abroad. The third section focuses on the implications of individual differences in selecting good practice activities, namely, age-related differences and aptitude-related differences.

Although DeKeyser's theoretical framework for practice is Anderson's skill acquisition theory, most contributors in the volume do not discuss practice within that same framework. In fact, a wealth of viewpoints is represented, conveying clearly that the topic of practice is also consequential to other strands of SLA research: for example, noticing-awareness-attention, interaction, output-production, or input processing. On the other hand, because few recent studies have addressed practice head on, what evidence we do have on practice is either methodologically outdated or indirect evidence from studies whose research questions focused on other topics with varying degrees of relatedness to practice. Here, the contributors do a remarkable job relating research findings relevant to practice from different strands of SLA literature; nevertheless, it does become rather confusing at times just what exactly counts as practice and how practice is different from other concepts such as learning, exposure to language data, or interaction. Even though there is great value in demonstrating that practice has relevance for different theoretical frameworks, in the end the concept of practice appears a bit unstable as a result of shifting between those various frameworks.

In Part 1 researchers and graduate students in bilingual education, language education, and applied linguistics will find a thorough, scholarly, state-of-the art synthesis of existing empirical findings related to practice. For those new to SLA, I would suggest reading Chapter 4 immediately after the Introduction because Leeman provides an exceptionally readable summary of terms and theoretical perspectives less experienced readers will find to be a valuable guide. Those looking for practical

advice on what constitutes good practice may find some of that in Chapters 5-9; many excellent suggestions are presented in these chapters, although not necessarily in a user-friendly format. The scholarly format--recommendations very closely tied to empirical research findings--may be off-putting to some. I would also recommend this collection to developers of high-tech learning tools for language practice because they need to understand well good practice's principles and processes in order to optimize the potentials those tools have to offer. The book is filled with principled insights on what good practice tasks are and how they might be structured to help learners progress from declarative to automatized knowledge.

A unique chapter, which might attract its own readership to this volume, is Robinson's article on language aptitude complexes or clusters. Here, Robinson offers far more than an account of how learner aptitude should influence the selection of appropriate practice tasks. Robinson draws on Richard Snow's (1987, 1994) aptitude complex hypothesis to present his own hierarchical model of language aptitude complexes. In this model, he differentiates among four language aptitude complexes or clusters of traits relevant to language learning: aptitude for focus on form, aptitude for incidental learning in the oral mode, aptitude for incidental learning in the written mode, and aptitude for explicit rule learning. He argues that the traditional concept of language aptitude, typically assessed by Caroll and Sapon's (1959) *Modern Language Aptitude Test* or its foreign language adaptations, addresses only the last complex, aptitude for explicit rule learning. Robinson analyzes the four aptitude complexes to identify relevant cognitive abilities embedded in each and connects these abilities to assessment tasks and tests in the published literature. More than just good practice recommendations for learners with different aptitudes, Robinson offers a compelling proposal for a new theoretical framework and outlines a complex system with many departure points for pursuing future empirical research on language aptitude.

Rather than as an authoritative synthesis or practical reference, *Practice in a Second Language* is better viewed as a phenomenal take-off for a new strand of second language studies. It convincingly demonstrates that the topic of practice is under-researched in the current methodological literature, even though it should be centrally important to several major strands of second language learning research. This volume will serve as a review of the present state of the literature, a principled inspiration, and an influential guide for future investigations into practice in a second language.

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