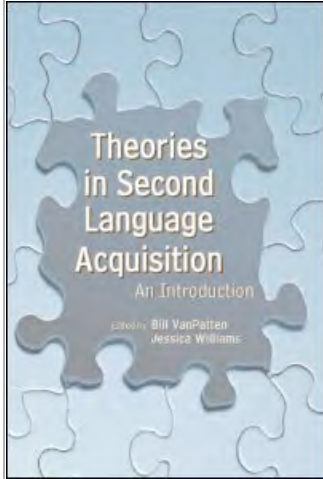


<i>Theories in Second Language Acquisition: An Introduction</i>		
Author:	Bill VanPatten & Jessica Williams, Eds. (2007)	
Publisher:	New York: Routledge	
Pages	ISBN	Price
Pp. vii + 261	0-8058-5738-9 (paper)	\$32.95 U.S.



Linguistics, applied linguistics, and second language acquisition research are difficult topics for many second-language education students. I have seen state scores that show that many prospective ESL teachers who take the PRAXIS ESL exam (required for certification to teach in public schools in the United States) will score lowest on the linguistics portion of the exam.

The problem does not lie entirely with these students. Academic linguists often write for other linguists and generally have not done an adequate job of communicating even basic language principles to the general public (Pinker, 2007). Without knowledge of these principles, students will often continue to believe in language myths (Bauer & Trudgill, 1999). In this text, Bill VanPatten and his co-author Jessica Williams attempt to address the problem by assembling a textbook accessible to those pursuing ESL degrees.

One of the big questions in SLA is "How do people learn a second language?" This question is critical. If we know how we learn a second language, only then can we begin to formulate effective pedagogy. Howard Gardner, whose Multiple Intelligences theory is very popular in education circles, has stated that each intelligence (linguistic, mathematical, musical, spatial, etc.) may demand a separate pedagogy (Gardner, 1999).

VanPatten and Williams, as editors of this collection, host various theorists in SLA. Each theory is given its own chapter:

1. Introduction: The Nature of Theories
Bill VanPatten and Jessica Williams
2. Early Theories in Second Language Acquisition
Bill VanPatten and Jessica Williams
3. Linguistic Theory, Universal Grammar
Lydia White
4. One Functional Approach to Second Language Acquisition: The Concept-Orientated Approach
Kathleen Bardovi-Harlig
5. The Associative-Cognitive CREED
Nick C. Ellis
6. Skill Acquisition Theory
Robert DeKeyser
7. Input Processing in Adult Second Language Acquisition
Bill VanPatten
8. Processability Theory
Manfred Pienemann
9. Autonomous Induction Theory
Susanne E. Carroll
10. Input, Interaction, and Output in Second Language Acquisition
Susan M. Glass and Alison Mackey
11. Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning
James P. Lantolf and Steven L. Thorne
12. Second Language Learning Explained? SLA Across Nine Contemporary Theories
Lourdes Ortega

In planning this collection VanPatten and Williams relied on experts in various SLA theories writing their respective chapters and presenting their cases therein. This approach has strong points and weak points. A strong point is that the reader learns from an expert in the theory. A weak point is that, for the most part, the reader is not given an inkling of possible weaknesses in or criticisms of the theory.

Although VanPatten and Williams state that this textbook is meant for an introductory course in SLA, I believe many students may be confused and may naturally ask, "Well, which theory is correct?" or possibly worse, take a non-principled eclectic approach that believes simultaneously in contradictory theories. In addition, the chapter writers have different writing strengths—and weaknesses—with some writing in academese rather than in the clear style evident in VanPatten and Williams's contributions.

The editors start their collection with ten observations about SLA that must be explained by any theory (pp. 9-12):

1. Exposure to input is necessary for SLA.
2. A good deal of SLA happens incidentally.
3. Learners come to know more than what they have been exposed to in the input.

4. Learner's output (speech) often follows predictable stages in the acquisition of a given structure.
5. Second language learning is variable in its outcome.
6. Second language learning is variable across linguistic subsystems.
7. There are limits on the effects of frequency on SLA.
8. There are limits on the effect of a learner's first-language on SLA.
9. There are limits on the effects of instruction on SLA.
10. There are limits on the effect of output (learner production) on language acquisition.

Each chapter writer is asked to explain how his or her theory fits these observations. However these ten observations do not always seem to be "givens" to the chapter authors. Sometimes the theories fit the givens, and sometimes they do not. Sometimes an author does not attempt to provide an explanation why his or her theory might not match one or more of the points the editors list. For example, DeKeyser does not attempt to suggest how his Skill Acquisition theory (a theory which sees language learning as similar to learning in many other domains) accommodates observations #1, #2, and #3.

In Ellis's Associative-Cognitive CREED, which holds that SLA is "Construction-based, Rational, Exemplar-driven, Emergent, and Dialectic" and that the process of language learning is similar to that of other types of learning (say, learning how to play chess or ping-pong), he does address each observation; but, for example, regarding VanPatten's observation #8, Ellis appears to be arguing for more of an L1 effect than VanPatten might like. Ellis writes: "Although it [L1] is no longer considered the clear and direct influence proposed in the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, its significance in the language learning process seems incontrovertible" (pp. 90-91).

On VanPatten's observation #9 Ellis remarks: "However, instruction is not always effective." Although this is certainly true, VanPatten's Observation #9 addresses specifically the "pedagogy of failure," a label that may be applied to foreign language classes in the United States (where students with several years of high school or university classes are unable to speak a simple sentence in the target language). Van Patten gives an example contrasting language learning with math, where a formula, $a=b=c$, never varies. This contrast in knowledge acquisition reminded me of the many students who make A's in other courses but barely pass or even fail language courses. In his earlier text *From Input to Output: A Teacher's Guide to Second Language Acquisition* (2002), VanPatten emphasized that there may be something different about second language acquisition compared to acquiring command of other academic subjects.

I agree. The old saw that the best way to learn a foreign language is to get oneself a foreign girlfriend/boyfriend has a great deal of truth to it. Any theory should address the success of this and other informal methods.

When I was a long-term resident in a hostel in Taiwan, I saw great English language improvement in Yoshi, a Japanese student who came to Taiwan to learn Chinese. He was taking four hours of Chinese classes a day. He spent afternoons in a language lab listening to

audio tapes in Chinese. He had Chinese homework every night. Late nights he visited my hostel to play cards and socialize with native English-speaking hostel dwellers. One night, I asked Yoshi: "Which do you think you have improved more in Taiwan, your English or your Chinese?" Yoshi answered (perhaps diplomatically) that he believed he had improved in both languages equally. Yoshi's progress in learning English informally is probably not uncommon but the implication is huge: Yoshi was working very hard in Chinese, had access to trained teachers, as well as language teaching devices—whereas in English he was just playing cards and chatting!

Neither DeKeyser nor Ellis, both of whom see language learning as just another domain, seems able to explain why learners say (in an example given by VanPatten and Williams in their Introduction): "Who do you wanna invite to dinner?" but do *not* say (even those who use "wanna" in other contexts): "*Who do you wanna take Susie to the prom next month?" VanPatten and Williams seem to believe that an SLA theory should address such inconsistencies in language usage. Yet the setup of their book does not provide for any critical follow-up when a theory does not seem to measure up to one or more of the editors' observations. And sometimes a theorist's response to the editors' "givens" can remind one of a political-debate transcript: a lot of squirming. Without any evaluating by VanPatten and Williams the student-reader might become frustrated when seeking *the* answer. A theory not only might contradict VanPatten and Williams's tenets of SLA, but could also contradict another, or even other, theories in the book. Students who are used to reading the average textbook, most written by a pair or team of writers, may not be used to reading chapters that sometimes contradict the previous ones.

VanPatten and Williams offer the story of the elephant and the blind men as an analogy. Each theory may provide one explanation of the elephant. I contend that perhaps a better analogy might be the Japanese movie *Rashomon*, in which a crime is replayed from different perspectives.

Again, the road leads back to what the compilers asked the contributors to do: measure their theory of SLA against VanPatten and Williams's ten observations. Such a directive leaves students (and teachers) themselves to ask: (1) "How well did the chapter's author *really* address the editors' ten observations?" (2) "What are weaknesses in the theory?" (3) "Does the theory address only a part of language acquisition? (4) "Which part?" (5) "What does the theory imply for practice in language teaching and learning as far as input, output, drills, teaching of grammar, pronunciation, and error correction?" Raising such questions requires critical thinking, but many of today's students are in the habit of viewing a text as gospel. Sometimes teachers do so as well. This is a book that if used in the classroom would greatly benefit from an informed instructor who acts as a mentor to lead students to reflect carefully on each theory.

Interestingly enough, Stephen Krashen's theories (which are listed along with behaviorism as an "early" theory of SLA), seem to hold up well under VanPatten and Williams's observations.

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