

Practice in a Second Language: Perspectives from Applied Linguistics and Cognitive Psychology

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Practice in a Second Language: Perspectives from Applied Linguistics and Cognitive Psychology, edited by Robert DeKeyser, discusses the role of second language (L2) practice across two related research fields: applied linguistics and cognitive psychology. The notion of practice is controversial and raises debate, as DeKeyser acknowledges in the very first page of the introduction to this volume. The controversy stems from the fact that practice is wrongly equated with mechanical drills, these having been rejected by mainstream language teaching methodologies over the past 30 years. In order to minimize potential controversies, DeKeyser presents a focused definition of practice as “specific activities in the second language, engaged in systematically, deliberately, with the goal of developing knowledge of and skills in the second language” (p. 1). The book is intended to be a helpful resource for L2 practitioners and researchers interested in understanding the role of practice in L2 acquisition.

In the introductory chapter, DeKeyser summarizes central questions regarding practice for researchers in the areas of second language acquisition (SLA) and cognitive psychology. One of these is whether practice affects SLA, and if so, whether the effect is skill-specific or task-specific. The role of feedback has also attracted the attention of some researchers, but it is still unclear how, when, and how much feedback may impact positively on SLA. Equally controversial is the automatization issue (i.e., how explicit knowledge becomes automatized through practice). All of these topics are discussed in the volume, which is organized in three sections. The first section discusses practice issues that apply to all L2 learning situations (e.g., the roles played by practice, feedback, input, output, attention, and interaction). The second section explores the extent to which different learning contexts (e.g., study abroad, English as a foreign language, and immersion) may favor or require specific types of practice activities. Finally, the chapters in the third section address how individual differences stemming from age and analytical skills (e.g., aptitude and working memory) should inform the design of L2 practice activities. As the author explains, most of the chapters in this volume focus on oral production, due to its controversial relationship with practice.

The first section comprises four chapters that address the issues of *receptive practice*, *output practice*, and *feedback* in connection with practice in all learning contexts. Leow opens this section by reviewing studies that investigate the extent to which receptive practice affects L2 acquisition. The author defines receptive practice as “any exposure to manipulated L2 input” (p. 21) that supplies students with exemplars, triggers their attention to form, and provides opportunities for limited task performance. Leow argues that attention is essential for learning to take place because it is “crucial for further long-term memory storage of L2 information” (p. 22). One of the pertinent issues he attempts to deal with in this chapter is how much explicit grammatical information is required during and prior to receptive practice.

In the second chapter in this section, Muranoi investigates how output practice (i.e., “any activity designed to provide L2 learners with opportunities to produce output,” p. 52) influences the development of productive skills L2 learners need for communication. Output practice is viewed by L2 practitioners as essential; nonetheless, there is an ongoing debate as to whether this

intuitive view is confirmed by empirical research. The author reviews studies that examine the role of output practice in “text reconstruction, essay writing, output-oriented interaction, and communication tasks” (p. 52). A concise summary of the findings and methodological limitations of the studies is provided; however, for the non-expert reader, some passages of these subsections are difficult to follow as a number of technical terms are not defined (e.g., *pruned speech rate* and *t-unit*). Muranoi concludes the chapter by suggesting that output practice through communicative tasks plays an important role in helping learners develop “well-balanced communicative competence” (p. 76). The results of empirical studies indicate that this type of output practice impacts positively on fluency and complexity, but that the development of accuracy is less clear. Muranoi proposes that accuracy could be enhanced if teachers provided learners with explicit formal instruction on the target structure directly after learners performed a communicative task. In other words, Muranoi advocates combining task-based instruction with focus on form.

Mackey’s chapter in the first section is particularly interesting for L2 practitioners, as it discusses the importance of interactional processes (e.g., meaning negotiation, feedback, and modified input) in conjunction with cognitive factors (e.g., attention, noticing, and memory). The author reviews a number of studies that attempt to explain how interaction influences L2 learning in relation to learners’ internal capacities and individual differences. As Mackey points out, research on the role of interaction in SLA has provided empirical support for classroom methodologies (e.g., task-based and focus on form). These methodologies posit that learners benefit from interaction as this is a moment for them to “negotiate for comprehensible input, receive feedback, and modify their output” (p. 100) while they are engaged in communicating meaning. The chapter concludes by underscoring the role played by the L2 instructor in selecting and designing communicative tasks that promote interaction in the classroom.

Closing the first section, Leeman advances the idea that feedback is an essential element in understanding L2 practice. The chapter begins by clarifying the definition of feedback and other related terms, such as *evidence* and *error correction*. As the author points out, connectionist theories of SLA emphasize the role of frequency and statistical properties (e.g., word length and word co-occurrence) of L2 input. They view feedback as an important factor leading to L2 learning, as it can provide positive and negative input, thus allowing the learner to detect gaps and errors and choose between competing forms in their interlanguage. A positive view of feedback is also supported by cognitive views of L2 learning, which regard it as essential in the three stages of learning: acquisition of declarative knowledge, fine tuning of L2 form during proceduralization, and automatization of correct form.

The second section comprises four chapters addressing different contexts in which second language learning can take place: immersion environments, foreign language (FL) classrooms, L2 classrooms, and study abroad. In each of these contexts, practice is seen as an essential component, and the major challenge is to define the right type and amount of practice for each situation. This entire section proves useful to L2 instructors interested in understanding the role of practice in L2 acquisition, and how practice interacts with learning context.

Ranta and Lyster support the claim that immersion instruction has failed to help English learners achieve native-like proficiency levels in terms of grammatical accuracy. The authors believe that by relying on the skill-learning theory framework to design instructional activities,

immersion instruction can be improved. Skill-learning theory emphasizes the role of practice in L2 learning as a means to improve performance by helping learners move from controlled to automatized processing, thus liberating “attentional resources for use in higher-level processing” (p. 147). Within this perspective, for automatization to occur, learners must be provided with tasks that require the processing of L2 forms while at the same time maintaining the goal of communication. They must also be given clear feedback as to whether the output form is appropriate. The authors briefly explain the three-stage model of skill-learning (i.e., awareness, practice, and feedback) as a way of designing form-focused instruction.

Van den Branden’s chapter draws attention to the importance of classroom instruction as a way to improve language learning in an L2 context. The author points out that well-designed classroom instruction is necessary to improve accuracy in the L2, and that this is possible if classroom instruction employs tasks simulating real-life communication. Furthermore, teacher feedback is essential, along with a positive and safe environment to boost learners’ confidence to use and experiment with the L2. The author explains how each of these elements can be implemented in the L2 classroom to encourage meaningful L2 use while simultaneously focusing on form, so that both fluency and accuracy are improved.

In the third chapter in this section, Ortega addresses optimal L2 learning in a typical foreign language context. The author makes a case that practice should be meaningful and should employ planned focus on form. She explains that successful practice should rely on tasks that are interactive, meaningful, and include structures and functions that are essential to task performance. Supported by the limited number of empirical studies available, the author addresses some controversial points related to promoting optimal practice in FL classrooms. Some of these concern the importance of student-student interaction inside and outside the classroom, the use of the first language, the delicate relationship between task complexity and accurate output, and the importance of mixed proficiency levels in the classroom. The author concludes by listing some interesting ways in which new technologies can be used to maximize L2 practice within and beyond the classroom context.

DeKeyser ends this section by arguing that study abroad periods may not boost L2 learning because these experiences very often fail to provide learners with the kind of practice that cognitive psychologists, especially skill acquisition theorists, consider optimal. The author concludes that the role of time abroad is to help learners move to the last stage of skill acquisition: automatization. In fact, he proposes that learners should ideally go abroad when they have already reached an intermediate level of proficiency in the target language. At this proficiency level learners already possess the declarative knowledge and initial proceduralization (Stages 1 and 2 of skill acquisition) which are required to fine-tune proceduralization and move on to automatization.

The third section contains two chapters that address individual difference issues such as age, working memory capacity, and cognitive ability. Both chapters assess how these issues should be dealt with when implementing language practice. In the first chapter, Muñoz discusses the importance of taking age-related factors into account when designing activities for L2 practice. The author relies on previous research to outline how L2 tasks should be designed for each age group. A number of existing empirical studies indicate that ultimate attainment is not necessarily higher when one starts learning an L2 at an early age, due to the interaction between learning

context (i.e., L2 vs. FL) and age of acquisition. For example, in an FL context, studies have shown that the initial advantage of younger learners tends to disappear when older learners receive the same amount of language instruction and exposure. Muñoz concludes the chapter by analyzing common textbook practice activities whose appropriateness for learners from different age groups (from preschoolers to high school students) was assessed by a group of FL teachers. The results indicated that the practice activities the teachers deemed appropriate took factors related to individual difference into account, such as learners' cognitive development, learners' aptitude, and affective and social characteristics of different age groups.

The last chapter in this volume makes a case for the role of aptitude in L2 learning. Robinson argues that the aptitude tests previously used provide a limited view of L2 learning aptitude, especially if we consider different instructional contexts and practice conditions. Based on preliminary research findings in the areas of focus on form, task-based learning, and task design, the author proposes a complex hierarchical model that includes aptitude complexes, ability factors, and cognitive ability factors. Robinson argues that more effective L2 learning is likely to take place if we manage to match learners' "patterns of abilities" (p. 279) to practice conditions that suit them.

In his conclusion, DeKeyser highlights some central issues that should be addressed to clarify the role of practice in L2 learning. As the author points out, the area requires more definitive answers, and these can only be obtained if researchers in the fields of cognitive psychology, second language acquisition, and educational psychology begin working in tandem, devising long-term and large-scale studies. The author believes that new technologies and research approaches presently available may help accomplish this challenging task.

This book is an important resource for those interested in carrying out research and implementing instruction related to practice in L2 learning. Each chapter suggests ways in which further research can improve understanding of the intricate relationship between practice and second language learning. The book also includes a glossary with some technical terms. However, it is not cross-referenced throughout the book, which makes it difficult for the reader to know whether some of the technical terms used without definition in a number of chapters are in the glossary. On a positive note, the editor helps the reader understand the connections between all the sections and chapters by presenting a comprehensive introduction and a summary for each section and the entire volume.

For the L2 practitioner, this volume may pose some difficulties as it can be problematic to follow all the terminology used by authors who often assume that readers are familiar with cognitive psychology and applied linguistics. Terminological obstacles aside, many chapters in this book reaffirm the importance of L2 instructors in providing language learners with adequate tasks, explicit instruction, and a suitable environment to promote L2 learning. Nonetheless, as stated in some of the chapters and, more clearly by DeKeyser in the concluding chapter, practice in the L2 classroom should be seen "as a necessary but far from sufficient condition for the development of second language skills" (p. 292). The book clearly advances the idea that well-structured, meaningful practice, accompanied by explicit instruction, is the essence of effective teaching.

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