

Book Reviewed: Problems in SLA. Long, Michael, H. (2007) Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.

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Problems in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) critically/analytically addresses relevant issues in Theory (Part I), Research (Part II), and Practice (Part III) in the discipline of SLA.

Long indicates that this book (about a “young science”) amounts to “a proposal concerning how the field might develop greater coherence and a clearer focus than it has now, and do so systematically, in part through guidance from work in the philosophy of science” (p. vii).

The treatment of problems (with the word *problems* being used in a broader sense than in its everyday use (see Preface for details)) as they relate to SLA theory, research, and practice provides an insightful assessment of the field, thus successfully lay the groundwork for future direction. *Problems in SLA*, it seems reasonable to say, achieves its intended aim.

In Part I, chapter 1 (“Second Language Acquisition Theories”) Long argues that the field has an excessive number of theories, a phenomenon not conducive to its growth as a science. The current “fragmented” state of work in SLA is illustrated with reference to differences in the fundamental nature of its theories, differences, for example, in scope, form and content. In addition, pointing out that criteria exist for evaluating theories, Long cautions that it is not appropriate to equate the merit of a theory with its application to classroom teaching, appropriately pointing out, however, “Whatever the precise relationship, given that SLA theorists and language teachers share a common interest, L2 development, it would clearly be self-defeating for either group to ignore the other’s work” (p. 20). In chapter 2 (“Problem Solving and Theory Change in SLA”), a number of questions related to theory are raised in the expectation that grappling with them will positively impact the growth of SLA as a discipline.

Part II of *Problems in SLA*, focusing on research, is comprised of chapter 3 (“Age Differences and the Sensitive Periods Controversy in SLA”) and chapter 4 (“Recasts in SLA: The Story So Far”). In the former chapter, the complexity of the study of child-adult differences is made clear. While it is generally agreed that children outperform adults over the long term, numerous matters remain unresolved about a critical or sensitive period (e.g., the age(s) at which potential attainment is diminished (keeping in mind that different aspects of language might be affected at different ages), the aspect(s) of language affected). Within the context of an extensive review of the literature on age-related differences, Long argues that research to date strongly supports the existence of maturational constraints. In chapter 4, focusing on feedback for the language learner, research results (subject, of course, as noted, to additional studies) point to the usefulness of corrective recasts. Recasts (referred to, as well, as “implicit negative feedback”) involve providing correct forms to a language learner during communication, without, however, shifting primary attention away from meaningful communication.

In Part III, chapter 5 (“Texts, Tasks, and the Advanced Learner”) treats the issue of methodology in language teaching. An approach that is communicative, but which nevertheless does deal with errors in form, is proposed. Realistic tasks are argued to be a major component of such an approach (the implementation of which, it is noted, is not without its problems). Critically, however, Long asserts, “Acquiring L2 knowledge tightly related to tasks similar to those that learners will encounter in their target discourse domains increases the likelihood of learning being successfully generalized to those domains” (p. 126). In chapter 6 (“SLA: Breaking the Siege”) charges (deemed to be unwarranted) leveled against the discipline of SLA are responded to in detail.

Among the major strengths of this book is its compelling argument demonstrating the importance of an understanding of the philosophy of science for specialists in SLA. Long’s recommendation that graduate students of SLA take coursework in the philosophy of science (which, he notes, is not common

now) is wise (and a logical outgrowth of his discussion linking the philosophy of science to the construction of theories, a matter of importance within SLA). At the very least, Long's recommendation is worthy of very serious consideration by educators. Additional commendable features of this book include extensive and detailed reference to (and insightful discussion of) relevant literature/studies, the thought-provoking nature of its content, and the helpful Figures and Tables incorporated at appropriate points in the text, to name a few. *Problems in SLA* deftly provides the reader with a heightened sense of where the field of SLA presently stands as well as some of the issues that remain to be resolved. Those who read this book will find it academically stimulating.