

# Novice Learners of Arabic in the Lagos State University and Stages of the Second Language Acquisition (SLA): A Preliminary Study

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## Abstract

Five stages of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) through which L2 acquirers must go before they can attain communicative skills in the L2 has been espoused. Those stages are based on the outcome of a number of researches on English as a foreign language. How far the stages are applicable to the learners of Arabic as a foreign language, especially in the Lagos State University (LASU) is the concern of this investigation. This paper therefore intends to report the outcome of a preliminary observational study of the Stages went through by some novies learners of Arabic as a foreign language in LASU. The author employed experience garnered at the Summer Training Institute on African/2<sup>nd</sup> Language Teaching organized by the America National African Language Resource Center (NALRC) in order to create ecolinguistic setting to motivate the learners and hence observed the performance of a few of them reported herein. The paper found out, among others, that only three of the stages can be said to be applicable to the class under review, that routines and patterns are very important inputs in SLA and that the length of time each student spent at a particular stage could not be determined but varied considerably.

**Keywords:** Novice Learners; Arabic Language; Lagos State University; Stages of SLA; SLA.

## 1. Introduction

The authors in [1] and [2:111] have, over the years, come to conclude that the goal of learning/acquiring any particular language is to use it in communication. Such conclusion might have necessitated the current trend of focusing on communicative ability in language pedagogy.

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In recent years, a major pedagogical goal has been to provide in-class activities that will provide practice in various communicative functions of language. This is why language teachers attempt to develop or design better instructional materials and methods toward communicative competence of their students. It is in the quest to achieve this that necessitates this present effort. Behind our minds are the 5 revolutionary hypotheses and the unanimously proposed 5 Stages of SLA in [1] that seem to have changed the course of language pedagogy and SLA in the last three decades. Some of us had learnt by heart these hypotheses, internalized them and they had become norm that guides our teaching. This author had been teaching Arabic language for over 14 years at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels in the Lagos State University (LASU) where Arabic is taught as a foreign language. The author also had the advantage of being a participant in the NALRC course in African Language Institute held in 2012 at the University of Wisconsin and holds the certificate accordingly. This preliminary observational research was carried out in a subsidiary/novice Arabic conversation class which comprised of students from different departments who chose Arabic as a subsidiary course, as part of the general requirements for graduation. The two courses under study are ALL 101 and ALL 102, Arabic conversation I and II respectively as highlighted in [3:95]. The courses are aimed at providing room for preliminary acquisition of Arabic language in order to lay a foundation for those who may wish to further their course of study in the language afterward. The students were of different backgrounds; some with little background knowledge of Arabic because they can read few portions of the Qur'an as Muslims, while others have no contact with Arabic from birth. I tried to provide some dosage of inputs in the classroom, in an interactive and interesting ways, to the best of my ability, to the extent that my students would not only want to attend my class regularly, but also visited me in my office and occasionally, on the school corridor, would want to murmur some Arabic inputs memorized in the classroom into my hearing. Since the conversation class is usually designed for only two semesters as part of graduation requirements for students from other departments, it does not provide adequate opportunity for the students to formally continue to improve on their Arabic language. Some very inquisitive students regularly visited my office to learn/acquire one vocabulary/expression or another. This provided me an opportunity to observe some of the regular callers who had no contact at all with Arabic in the past. They were also not Muslims but were just interested in understanding Arabic language. In any case, they are the subject of this study.

## **2. SLA – Its Theory and Premises**

In a broader sense, SLA theory seeks to quantify how and by what process individuals acquire L2. However, despite the emerging trend towards designing theoretical paradigms in SLA research; [4:82] notes a great amount of difference in its entire conceptualization which seems to keep us farther from having a coherent comprehensive theory of SLA. Pienemann argues in [5] that it is beyond individual researchers to articulate a comprehensive theory of SLA. For this reason, he designed the processability theory as a modular approach with the aim of explaining developmental schedules in SLA. However, the SLA theory propounded by Krashen in [1] seems to be the widely known and well accepted with a large impact in all areas of second language research and teaching since the 1980s. His theory of SLA is premised on five main hypotheses discussed below.

### **2.1 The Acquisition-Learning hypothesis**

Krashen in [1:7] opines that there are two independent systems of second language performance - 'the acquired system' and 'the learned system'. He describes the 'acquired system' as the product of a subconscious process similar to the one children undergo when they acquire their first language, and that it requires meaningful interaction in the target language and enabling natural communication settings; while he contends in [1:10] that the 'learned system' is the product of formal instruction which comprises a conscious process of knowledge about the language, such as the knowledge of grammatical rules. In the class under study, the acquired system is the focused because even the description and objective of the course seem to suggest a spontaneous language production in familiar conversational contexts.

## ***2.2 The Natural Order hypothesis***

Krashen in [1:12-14] reviews research findings by Dulay & Burt (1974), Fathman (1975) and Makino (1980) which suggested that the acquisition of grammatical morphemes follows a predictable 'natural order'. Krashen however contends that such grammatical sequencing must be rejected when the goal is language acquisition. Going by the descriptions of these courses, morpho-syntactic rules were relegated to the background and hence concentration on routines (frequent expressions or utterances in phrases or sentences mastered by acquirer) and patterns (formed two-word phrases or sentences through creativity of the acquirer).

## ***2.3 The Monitor hypothesis***

This explains the relationship between acquisition and learning; and defines the influence of the latter on the former. The monitoring function is the practical result of the learned grammar. According to [1:15], the acquisition system is the utterance initiator, while the learning system performs the role of the 'monitor' or the 'editor'. The author in [1:16] explains that the 'monitor' acts in a planning, editing and correcting function when three specific conditions are met: that is, the second language learner has sufficient time at his/her disposal, s/he focuses on form or thinks about correctness, and s/he knows the rule. He also suggests in [1:19] that there is individual variation among language learners with regard to 'monitor' use. He distinguishes "over-users" of the Monitor, the "under-users" and the "optimal users" of the Monitor and that lack of self-confidence is frequently related to the over-use of the 'monitor'. Because very less emphasis was given to rules of grammar here, the monitor was played down to the extent that students were free to make mistakes and self-corrected themselves.

## ***2.4 The Input hypothesis***

This is Krashen's attempt to explain how second language acquisition takes place. In [1:20 - 27], he contends that the Input hypothesis is only concerned with 'acquisition' and not 'learning'. According to this hypothesis, the learner improves and progresses along the 'natural order' when s/he receives second language 'input' that is one step beyond his/her current stage of linguistic competence. For example, if a learner is at a stage 'i', then acquisition takes place when s/he is exposed to 'Comprehensible Input' that belongs to level 'i + 1'. Since not all of the learners can be at the same level of linguistic competence at the same time, Krashen suggests that natural communicative input is the key to designing a syllabus, ensuring in this way that each learner will receive some 'i + 1' input that is appropriate for his/her current stage of linguistic competence. Our inputs in this class was

calculated situational ones which were built up progressively adding, formally, not more than 5 in a class which the students used as springboard to produce intakes within and without the classroom.

## **2.5 The Affective Filter hypothesis**

The author in [1:30-31] reports that the concept of Affective Filter was a proposal by Dulay and Burt (1977) as an offshoot of the theoretical work done in the area of affective variables and SLA. This forms the basis of the author's view in [1:30-32] that a number of 'affective variables' play a facilitative role in SLA. Elsewhere, [6] asserts that success in language acquisition has relationship with the Affective variables. These variables are motivation, self-confidence and anxiety. He claims that learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, and a low level of anxiety are better equipped for success in SLA. While those of low motivation, low self-esteem, and debilitating anxiety can combine to raise the affective filter and form a mental block that prevents comprehensible input from being used for acquisition. Krashen literally hypothesized that these attitudinal factors relate directly to language acquisition and not learning. [7:1508] also observes that if a student possesses a high filter they are less likely to acquire language comprehensible input because of shyness and concern for grammar. While students that possess a lower affective filter will be more likely to acquire much more inputs because they are less likely to be impeded by other factors. It was found out that the affective filter is an important component of second language learning and hence I tried to create enabling environment that reduced anxiety and enhanced self-confidence so that students could participate in the class exercise and games.

## **3. Ecology of SLA**

It may be important here to examine the environment or external factors that affect SLA, especially as it relates to within and without the acquirer on one side and the University community on the other. The authors in [8:17] reported that Haugen called this idea Ecolinguistic which was originally defined in 1972 by the Norwegian linguist Einar Haugen as "the study of interactions between any given language and its environment". Formal environments like the classroom and self study normally provide basic linguistics rules and feedback for the development of Monitor; while the informal environment provides informal inputs and thus possibly exposes students to different types of discourse and different pragmatic uses of language. Considering the holism theory here, it therefore implies that language is not studied as an isolated, self-contained system, but rather in its natural or contextual surroundings. This is as noted by [8:18] that successful language acquisition, production and evolution is a function of the personal, situational, cultural, and societal factors. I like to state here, therefore, that Ecolinguistic of Arabic study in LASU has not been encouraging.

## **4. Stages of SLA and the Novies**

### **4.1 What I did**

With the internalized SLA hypotheses referred above and communicative theory behind my mind, I tried to create interestingly enabling environment for the students under study. The environment that would develop their interest, motivate them, reduce anxiety and validate their self-confidence. I sold self and subject to the

students, I also gave them a feeling for Arabic and made them love it, gave them confidence on the possibility of acquiring Arabic Language, discussed with them advantage of Arabic in the modern world, made the class lively and communicative through “caretaker speech” (shortened sentences or phrases with restricted vocabularies and simplified grammar) as explained in [9] and introduction of games. In addition, I created informal setting for interactions, situationalized/localized materials used (talk about Lagos and Ibadan not Cairo and Lebanon) by application of “here and now principle” as discussed in [10]; that is discussion about items within immediate environment and themselves. I created free access even on the corridor in order to provide opportunity for intake outside the class because of its rarity in our own setting.

#### **4.2 Feedback from the Students**

After creation of the above settings, the feedback from the students included good attitudes to teacher and classroom, self confidence, empathy towards native speakers, use of “routines” mainly memorized but neither able to recognize in sentences nor able to use in new combination or context. These students were also able to use “patterns”, that is forming phrases or sentences through creativity of the acquirer and early construction usually constrained to two word utterances or sentences.

### **5. Stages of SLA**

The model espoused by [11], in their influential book titled the “*Natural Approach*” on the basis of which many language curricula were written, suffices and very useful here, even though they arrived at the approach based on consistent researches on learners of English language as a second language. Five distinct stages of SLA are identified and they claim that all students acquiring English will pass through them. These are the Pre-production, Early production, Speech emergence, Intermediate fluency and Advanced fluency. I tried to observe these stages of SLA as demonstrated by the students under study and agreed that silent cum active listening enhanced their comprehension which preceded production and that students frequently fell back on the first language surface structure when unable to produce the required structure of the L2 because they were yet to acquire the structure or word to do so. For instance, they produced structures like

*anā lawyer* instead of *anā muhāmiyyun*

*anā engineer* instead of *anā muhandisun*

*anta teacher* instead of *anta mu'allimun etc.*

#### **5.1 Stage I: Pre-production**

This set of students actually went through this period, the silent period; the period referred to by [11:75] and [12] as when the L2 acquirer is first introduced to the language and the time when s/he begins to speak it. At this stage, I observed that they were listening attentively and gathering some amount of words and phrases into their

receptive vocabulary and could copy words from the board. They usually repeated everything said in the class parroting and mimicking. They could understand and duplicate gestures and movements to show comprehension which enabled them to, in the first class, respond to question such as:

“*Mā ismuka*”? (ما اسمك) meaning *what is your name?*

It is observed that Language learners, at this stage, would need much repetition and drilling through the Total Physical Response (TPR) technique.

## 5.2 Stage II: Early production

My experience, at this stage, showed variations from student to student, especially if consideration is given to their different backgrounds. They were able to develop receptive and more active vocabularies. They could speak in one or two word phrases such as:

<i>Ṣobāḥu al-khair</i>	(صباح الخير)	-	good morning
<i>Ṣobāḥu nūr</i>	(صباح النور)	-	good morning
<i>Mā ismuka</i>	(ما اسمك)	-	what is your name?
<i>kayfa anta</i>	(كيف أنت)	-	how are you?
<i>kayfa ḥāluka</i> etc,	(كيف حالك)	-	how is your condition?

These are routines and patterns that have been memorized. The Students might however neither able to recognize these items in other combinations nor use them to form sentences on their own. They could also respond to the basic two-word question types such as:

<i>Mā ḥāza</i>	(ما هذا)	what is this?
<i>man anta</i>	(من أنت)	who are you?
<i>kayfa ḥāluka</i>	(كيف حالك)	how are you?
<i>ayna aṭ-ṭālib</i> etc.	(أين الطالب)	where is the student?

Their responses included:

<i>ḥāza kitābun</i>	(هذا كتاب)	-	this is a book
<i>ḥāza qalamun</i>	(هذا قلم)	-	this is a pen

<i>hāza kursiyun</i>	(هذا كرسي)	-	this is chair
<i>hāza sabūratun</i> (sic) etc	(هذا سبورة)	-	this is a board
<i>anā ṭālibun</i>	(أنا طالب)	-	I am a student
<i>anā ṭabībun</i>	(أنا طبيب)	-	I am a doctor
<i>anā 'ustāzun</i>	(أنت أستاذ)	-	you are a professor
<i>al-qalamu jadīdun</i> etc.	(القلم جديد)	-	the pen is new

### 5.3 Stage III: Speech emergence

At this stage, they showed that they have stored more vocabularies and could communicate with simple phrases and sentences such as:

<i>anā fī al-faṣlu</i> (sic)	(أنا في الفصل)	I am in the classroom.
<i>anā jālisun alā al-kurisiyyu</i> (sic)	(أنا جالس على الكرسي)	I am sitting on the chair.
<i>'indī qalamun</i>	(عندي قلم)	I have a pen.
<i>anā masrūrun jiddan</i>	(أنا مسرور جدا)	I am very happy.
<i>al-qalam fī haqībatu</i> (sic) Tunde	(القلم في حقيبة تندي)	the pen is in Tunde's bag.

*jī 'tu minā al-baytu* (sic) *ilā al-jāmi'ah* etc. (جئت من البيت إلى الجامعة) I came from home to the University.

It must be stated here that none of the students under study could observe the grammatical inflexions in their utterances. This is because the course in question is firstly titled “conversation” and secondly because our method was premised on communicative and student centered theory. It must also be stated here that this is where majority of the students are lost mainly because the environment does not give currency to communication in Arabic language, the period of two semesters allotted was very short and the required course load in their major academic programmes did not give room for additional subsidiary subjects. More dosage of vocabulary were introduced to strengthen this stage so that they could use, more often, the already comprehensible inputs-patterns. This happened more at the ALL 102 class in the second semester.

### 5.4 Stage IV: Intermediate fluency

It is difficult to judge whether these students got to this stage or not before we lost contact because they have to

concentrate on more other subjects as they advanced in their field of primary specialization.

### **5.5 Stage V: Advanced Fluency:**

This stage does not also apply here at all.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study agrees that successful language learning can only take place in an environment where learners' values and positive attitudes are promoted, where they approach learning with confidence and can use the target language at ease without fear of mistakes and errors. Therefore, teachers are enjoined to make efforts toward creating conducive environment that enhances students' self-confidence. Designing materials for mechanical drills seems not difficult, but providing intake via meaningful and communicative activities is quite a challenging task; this is because language acquisition develops better when the intake is communicative and understood. Routines & patterns are therefore essentially very useful in SLA classroom for establishing social relations and encouraging intakes, even if they are not sufficient for successful language acquisition. This study reveals that the Stages of SLA that were applicable to the students under study are the first three stages because of the reasons already mentioned in the body of the paper. None of them could get to the Intermediate fluency stage. It is also acknowledged that the length of time each student spent at a particular stage was naturally different from one student to another. By way of final conclusion, I like to submit that language acquisition can be more central than language learning in L2 performance and the major function of the L2 classroom would be to provide comprehensible inputs for acquisition and communication and hence the communicative method is very important.

### **6.1 Constraints/Limitations**

- i. Inability to match the students' different motivations with the time spent in each of the stages of SLA and
- ii. inability to match both motivation and time spent with performance.

### **6.2 Recommendations**

- i. Conducive ecolinguistic – physical and emotional – should be created in order to reduce anxiety.
- ii. Communicative method of language teaching should continue in L2 classroom in order to make the class more interactive and participatory.
- iii. Immediate environment of the L2 learners/acquirers should be the starting point for the design of “Routines and Patterns” in L2 class; that is to employ the “Here and Now Principle” in order to make the linguistic properties of L2 more visible.
- iv. Training and retraining of L2 teachers should be encouraged in order to refresh the teachers on the latest development in language pedagogy.
- v. Peculiar to Arabic language teaching in LASU, more near native speaker situations should be improvised to help its acquirers.



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