Talking about Second Language Acquisition by Karim Sadeghi, Palgrave Macmillan (2022), 271 pp. ISBN: 978-3-030-99757-1

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During my work as an English teacher in Beijing, students asked me (the first author) tricky questions about learning English as a second language (L2). Some of these tricky questions included "Should I learn the phonetics or vocabulary first?", and "How many hours should I spend on learning English if I want to communicate fluently with native speakers?". A father even asked me if his 7-year-old daughter would get confused if she studied two languages simultaneously. Some of them I could manage to answer, but oftentimes I was struggling to give plausible explanations which I would be doubtful about either. Even if I tried my best to reassure these students based on my own experience, truths about language learning eluded me. I could not help but think if Sadeghi's book was out back then and I happened to read it, I might have given more satisfactory answers to these knotty questions concerning second language acquisition (SLA).

Sadeghi's timely publication seems ready to answer all these thorny questions. What differentiates his book from other academic volumes is its interview-based style, rather than the traditional topic-based collection of scholastic elucidation on concepts, theories, and empirical studies. The interviewing of 14 scholars in the field personalizes some very academic topics, which would sometimes seem daunting for laymen. The incorporation of each scholar's life story is another feature of the book, which makes it a vivid reading and shortens the distance between these scholars and readers. Sadeghi includes both general and personalized questions. While the identical questions elicit both conflicting and consistent views, which engages readers in heated debates, the tailor-made questions accentuate the specialties and state-of-the-art research each expert is contemplating and conducting in his/her specific subfield. The 14 interviews cover some of the most prominent grounds pertaining to SLA, from the sub-skills of a language, such as pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and syntax, to the acquisition process of L2, like input and interaction, instructed SLA, bi/multilingualism, and first language (L1) attrition, to the application of digital technology in SLA. These topics range from pure theory constructions to application in pedagogies, piecing together an emerging map that has been evolving for more than half a century. Notwithstanding an explosion of research in this field within such a relatively short period,

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definitions of SLA and some key terms are still a contending issue among scholars, which Sadeghi attempts to address in his introductory chapter.

Trying to put the somewhat messy definitions of SLA into order is what Sadeghi does in the introductory chapter. Focusing on the three key terms of SLA — "Second", "Language", "Acquisition" and citing seminal works spanning half a century from Selinker (1972) to Klein (1986), Larsen-Freeman (2000), McCarthy (2016), Spada and Lightbown (2020), Widdowson (2021) and Ellis (2021), Sadeghi arrives at two principal aims of SLA: to investigate the nature and the learning process of L2. Despite the stunning array of definitions, Sadeghi eventually subscribes to Saville-Troike and Barto's (2017) which addresses the two aims in a comprehensive way. Then, after providing a snapshot of the history of SLA developing as an independent discipline, Sadeghi turns to the key issues and concepts in the field. He lays out eight questions identified by VanPatten et al. (2020), eight topics recognized by Cook and Singleton (2014), seven pairs of dichotomous terms discussed by de Bot et al. (2005), seven issues listed by Larsen-Freeman (2018), four strands identified and eight phenomena observed by Husltijn (2007), and five phases of SLA history divided by Ellis (2021). Whichever way used to phrase the issues or concepts in SLA, incontestably the most pressing issues now center around the processing of input, L1-L2 differences, and cognitive, individual and sociocultural factors in L2 development. When discussing factors affecting SLA in the following section, Sadeghi highlights the Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST) advocated by Kees de Bot to show us the extremely complex dynamics among factors (intrinsic and extrinsic) contributing to L2 acquisition. The chapter ends with an overview of the book content and an explanation of the interview-based approach. Sadeghi's introduction guides readers with a succinct framework to capture the most essentials of the field. It is easy for newcomers to conceptualize and get an idea of what is going on in SLA since its inception.

Following the pithy overview, Sadeghi now presents the information-laden interviews which are based on three main themes: the scholars' life histories, their contributions to the field, and their views on the current and future trends of SLA. For us, the most fascinating part of the interviews is their life histories. How did these scholars grow interested in languages? What prompted them to embark on the academic journey of linguistics and SLA? Answers are diverse. Some of them experienced bilingual or multilingual environment when growing up (e.g., Susan Gass, Antonella Sorace), while others took a more average path growing up in monolingual families but learned a second or third language while at school or college (e.g., Alison Gabriele, Rosa Manchon). The variegated life experiences have become a source of their inspiration and beliefs in certain aspects of SLA. Monika Schmid's two years' stay in the US during her infancy planted the seed of English which was revived with only six weeks' immersion in the States after more than a decade of speaking German. It reveals to her the "window of recoverability" (p. 160) and timing of relearning in language attrition. Masatoshi Sato's experiences of learning English at secondary school and Chinese at university with the typical Japanese grammar translation method contrasted with his later naturalistic learning of Bulgarian, Spanish, and French, providing him with ample sources for researching classroom intervention and learner psychology. Of course, some interviewees commenced their academic career with serendipity: Alison Mackey mistakenly walked into a linguistic classroom for graduates while she was still an undergraduate in Lancaster University! These engaging life stories provide readers with an intimate and personalized perspective of how the SLA scholars shared their language learning episodes in mostly unique contexts.

For readers who are more concerned with the nuts and bolts of state-of-the-art research in specific subfields of SLA, the second part of the interviews guarantees the most authoritative explication and interpretation of what these linguists have done and been doing. The custom-made questions raised to each interviewee are firmly grounded on their academic output and achievements respectively, digging into not only the particular concepts, theories, and updates of their research in important publications, but also their own revolution of academic ideas in the field. These specialized questions attempt to sketch out each scholar's academic roadmap and highlight the

most significant contributions they have made to the development of the field. Without extensive knowledge of the field and a close examination of the interviewers' voluminous research output, it would have been impossible for Sadeghi to pose such in-depth questions, leading to desired answers both the interviewer and readers expect to get. For example, a question posed to Norbert Schmitt, asking about incidental learning in vocabulary acquisition, is directly related to one of the most controversial issues of vocabulary learning in SLA (Huckin & Coady, 1999). The response from Schmitt helps to clarify a long-standing misconception about vocabulary learning that words can be acquired just by being exposed to the target language. This is because vocabulary learning is incremental and scattered encounters with a word do not guarantee learning it. That is why explicit and intentional study is so important, as Schmitt emphasizes. Although more empirical research from the cognitive perspective is needed to testify the effectiveness of explicit learning (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001), we are quite positive that a reading of this interview will save those who are trapped in the vocabulary learning maze. Such theory- and evidence-based suggestions are plenty throughout the interviews. It would be a treasure for both L2 learners and teachers to dig into.

One intriguing facet about the third part of the interviews is that, when proposing the same questions about some most debated topics to all interviewees, divergence and convergence of ideas and beliefs emerge, based on which one can actually divide these scholars into different camps! Bearing this in mind, Sadeghi inquires one most debated issue in the field of SLA: what factors or variables affect the acquisition of an L2 the most, be they physiological, individual or sociocultural. Responses from these scholars are sometimes at opposite poles. For example, when citing one of the most fundamental theories in the field of SLA— Steven Krashen's Input Hypothesis, Norbert Schmitt criticizes it as "extreme" and "incorrect" (p. 102), pointing out that input itself is not enough for vocabulary acquisition. Scholars from the opposite camp, however, view input as "having paramount importance" (p. 115), as Alison Gabriele highlights. The same endorsement for Input Hypothesis also comes from Alessandro Benati, who contends that exposure to comprehensible and meaningful input is key to effective language processing. As to internal mechanisms, some show acute criticism towards Noam Chomsky's Universal Grammar. For example, Kees de Bot, having been exposed to a notably anti-Chomsky environment in the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, considers universal grammar (UG) as a theory of SLA a failed approach when compared with the more practical usage-based (UB) approaches (p. 204). This is in stark contrast to the views of longtime proponent of the theory, Lydia White, who affirms the pivotal function of universal grammar in second language acquisition (2003). William O'Grady, belonging to the same camp as Kees de Bot, openly expresses his long-standing opposition to universal grammar and argues that he does not think language has a "predetermined architecture" (p. 127). Such astute views and beliefs have made the field of SLA full of vigor and the book full of intellectual sparks.

As we have discussed throughout the review, this conversation-based collection gives, we would not say panoramic, but a microcosmic synopsis of the field of SLA in a brisk way. The conversational style ensures easy understanding of even some obscure terminologies, which makes it a priority reading for both undergraduate and graduate students who are new to but interested in second language acquisition. The book is also well suited for research postgraduates and novice researchers in SLA. They can find inspirations and directions for their future studies. Last, but certainly not least, we would strongly recommend the book to ESL teachers, since they are the ones who are facing the most pressing issues in the practice of teaching a second language. The once tricky questions from students we recounted in the opening paragraph may now find some valid answers from the book.

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