



5 Ways Second Language Acquisition Is Relevant to ELT

by [Michael Lessard-Clouston](#)

Teachers who complete a TESOL certificate or further training typically take a course in second language acquisition (SLA). Yet in teaching, soon after graduation, they find themselves busy with lesson plans, grading, and many other tasks. So why bother studying SLA or its research? In this article, I discuss five ways that SLA is relevant to English language teachers, and I introduce 10 SLA-related journals and encourage teachers to check out relevant articles.

1. It Helps English Language Teachers Understand Student Learning

It is not unusual for English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers to include a statement of teaching philosophy with job applications, and for college, school, or university employers to require such a statement. However, it is really difficult to write a good teaching philosophy if you haven't thought carefully about classroom English language learning. In the MA TESOL program where I teach, one of the options for the final assignment in our SLA course is to write up your philosophy of language learning. After considering a range of topics from our textbooks and discussing relevant articles, students have the opportunity to prepare a well-articulated statement of how various SLA topics influence students' English language learning, and therefore inform their ESL/EFL teaching. To teach well, one needs to understand learning, so SLA is key.

2. It Allows Teachers to Reflect on Their Own Learning

Reflecting on learning to inform your teaching is simply a best practice in English language teaching (ELT). Teachers who know other languages and cultures, for example, should therefore examine their own second/foreign language learning to consider what is relevant from their knowledge and experience for their ESL/EFL teaching. As writers such as Cook (2016) have observed, teachers should also view our students as English learners (ELs) with multicompetence, rather than as those who are not native English speakers. A practical issue in many contexts is the use of code-switching with such students when it is useful, such as for classroom management or for quickly explaining grammar or vocabulary. In essence, these aspects of SLA can help us to apply our knowledge and experience as language learners and to have a correct understanding of our students as English language users.

3. Input, Output, and Interaction

Essential to SLA are the concepts of input, output, and interaction, as recent work by Nava and Pedrassini (2018) and others makes clear. ELs need appropriate *input*—good, example language in various forms—not only from reading but also through listening, reflecting both oral and written models in classroom language and English in textbooks, multimedia, readings, and so on. SLA helps teachers tailor their classroom speech and choose materials for their students’ levels. For SLA, *output* is also required, and that involves speech and writing with communicative purposes—student language in spoken and written form. Output enables both students and their teachers to recognize aspects of students’ English language learning, and pushes them further in the development of their underlying English linguistic system. *Interaction* is where students negotiate meaning through input and output with others in class, and hopefully reach mutual comprehension. SLA research reveals that interaction helps students notice gaps in their knowledge and thus gives them feedback, and SLA provides suggestions for relevant input, output, and interaction in ELT.

4. Practical Pedagogical Insights and Guidance

SLA offers pedagogical insights and guidance concerning issues we face in teaching English. Two important ones are anxiety and error correction. ELs are human beings with emotions and feelings, and SLA reveals that if the classroom or other context creates too much apprehension in learners, it is difficult for ESL/EFL students to deal with English input and produce the requisite output in various forms in interaction. SLA research offers ways for teachers to help reduce students’ classroom anxiety, while also reminding us that some forms of anxiety are actually facilitative, such as when a student is slightly nervous before a presentation or test and yet does well.

Error correction can certainly be anxiety producing if it is not handled well in ELT, and SLA research reports on the success (or failure) and usefulness of different approaches. Brown and Larsen-Hall (2012), for example, summarize research dealing with both oral and written error correction, suggesting that to be effective, ESL/EFL teachers’ feedback should be focused and specific, ideally help students notice and learn to correct their own mistakes, and be constant over an extended period of time, rather than brief and haphazard.

5. It Helps Untangle and Focus a Complex Field

Classroom ESL/EFL teachers should consider regarding the relevance of SLA and its research because they offer teachers and students insights into the complexity of language learning; balanced perspectives on the roles of grammar, vocabulary, and focus on form in English language learning; and suggestions for what to focus on in ELT. I elaborate on these and other points in my short book, *Second Language Acquisition Applied to English Language Teaching* (Lessard-Clouston, 2018). Like other titles in the TESOL Press series for [English Language Teacher Development](#), it provides a concise introduction to key topics for practicing teachers, while also offering examples and opportunities for teacher reflection so that readers can apply recent SLA research and theory to their own classroom ESL/EFL teaching.

If you agree that SLA and its research might be relevant for you (and perhaps something to consider during a break), following I introduce 10 journals where you can access relevant articles that deal with classroom ESL/EFL learning and teaching. Perry's (2017) guide is a recommended resource for understanding and evaluating such published research. It will assist discerning readers in moving beyond the "teaching implications" sections of SLA research articles to connect the background, methods, and other issues of such work to their own ELT.

Journals for Accessing SLA Research

Reading data-based, primary research keeps teachers up to date on SLA and how it can apply to their teaching situations. The following briefly annotated starter list includes free, open-access online journals as well as periodicals to which you can subscribe. The latter group includes *TESOL Journal*, which is available for free to all TESOL International Association members. If you don't want to invest in a subscription for the other titles, check whether your college or university has a subscription that you have access to as a student, faculty member, teacher, or alumnus.

Online, Open-Access Journals

- [*Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*](#): This is a great European journal publishing a range of articles on various aspects of SLA.
- [*TESL Canada Journal*](#): This twice-yearly journal publishes ESL/EFL research, including various SLA studies.
- [*TESL-EJ*](#): This is one of the first online journals to publish ELT articles informed by SLA research.

Journals Available by Subscription

- [*Instructed Second Language Acquisition*](#): This is a new journal that focuses on SLA in classroom and other instructed contexts.
- [*Language Learning*](#): This first SLA journal incorporates theory and both quantitative and qualitative studies.
- [*Language Learning Journal*](#): This European journal focuses on SLA in relation to many different languages.
- [*Language Teaching Research*](#): Despite the title, many articles in this journal report on SLA research as it relates to ELT.
- [*Studies in Second Language Acquisition*](#): A major SLA journal, *SSLA* largely emphasizes quantitative approaches to SLA research.
- [*TESOL Journal*](#): Free to all [TESOL International Association](#) members, this journal publishes many SLA-related ELT studies.
- [*TESOL Quarterly*](#): ESL and EFL studies reporting SLA often appear in TESOL's oldest research journal.

Conclusion

SLA is a research-based applied linguistics field that can inform and support ESL/EFL teachers' instructional practices, as well as their professional development. Hopefully you now understand how SLA is relevant to ELT and to your teaching, specifically, and will choose to locate some SLA research articles of interest in some of the journals introduced here.

References

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Michael Lessard-Clouston (PhD, OISE/University of Toronto) directs the MA in Applied Linguistics at Biola University in La Mirada, California, USA, where he also teaches in its on-campus and online MA TESOL programs. He has taught English and done teacher training in Canada, China, Indonesia, and Japan, and is the author of two titles in the [English Language Teacher Development](#) series from TESOL Press, on vocabulary (2013) and SLA (2018).