

Second Language Learning through a Psycholinguistic Lens: Cognitive, Linguistic, and Pedagogical Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the process of second language (L2) learning through the interdisciplinary lens of psycholinguistics, focusing on cognitive, linguistic, and pedagogical dimensions. Drawing from foundational theories such as Chomsky's Universal Grammar, Krashen's Input Hypothesis, and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, the research investigates how learners acquire, process, and produce language within educational settings. Emphasis is placed on understanding the internal mechanisms of attention, memory, and comprehension, as well as external factors such as input quality, interaction, feedback, and instructional design. The study underscores the distinction between linguistic competence and performance, highlighting the challenges learners face in transitioning from passive understanding to active language production. It further examines how psycholinguistic principles can inform learner-centered pedagogies, promote meaningful communication, and foster long-term language development. The findings advocate for a holistic approach to language instruction that aligns teaching practices with how the brain processes and acquires language, ultimately enhancing both fluency and communicative competence in second language learners.

Keywords: Psycholinguistics, Second Language Acquisition, Language Comprehension and Production, Learner-Centered Pedagogy, Cognitive Language Processing.

1. Introduction

The acquisition of L2 is a complex, multidimensional process influenced by an intricate interplay of cognitive, linguistic, and pedagogical factors. In recent decades, psycholinguistics, the interdisciplinary study of the psychological and neurobiological mechanisms that underlie language processing, has emerged as a crucial field in understanding how individuals learn and use language. By examining how learners perceive, process, store, and produce language, psycholinguistics offers valuable insights that inform language teaching methodologies, curriculum design, and learner-centered instruction.

Traditional approaches to SLA often emphasized rote memorization or structural grammar instruction. However, advancements in cognitive psychology and linguistic theory have revealed that language learning is deeply rooted in internal mental processes, such as memory, attention, perception, and information processing. Psycholinguistics

bridges these domains, allowing researchers and educators to better understand how learners comprehend input, construct meaning, formulate output, and develop linguistic competence over time.

This research explores second language learning through the lens of psycholinguistics, focusing on three interconnected perspectives: cognitive mechanisms that drive language acquisition, linguistic structures that shape language development, and pedagogical strategies that harness these insights in educational settings. By examining core topics such as the input hypothesis, the competence-performance distinction, language comprehension and production, and the role of interaction and feedback, the study seeks to highlight how psycholinguistic principles can transform second language teaching and learning into a more effective, engaging, and scientifically grounded process.

Ultimately, this investigation aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue between theory and practice in language education, emphasizing the importance of aligning instructional approaches with the cognitive and linguistic realities of learners. In doing so, it advocates for a more informed and holistic framework for second language instruction, one that is guided not only by pedagogical intuition but also by empirical evidence from the science of the mind and language.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation for understanding second language learning from a psycholinguistic perspective is built upon three interconnected pillars: cognitive theories of language processing, linguistic models of acquisition, and pedagogical frameworks that integrate psycholinguistic insights. These perspectives collectively inform how learners perceive, internalize, and produce a second language, and how teaching strategies can be aligned with the natural processes of the mind.

2.1 Cognitive Theories of Language Acquisition

Cognitive psychology offers essential insights into the mental processes involved in language learning, particularly through its exploration of how the brain processes, stores, and retrieves linguistic information. Central to this understanding is the Information Processing Model, which posits that language acquisition involves a sequence of interrelated cognitive operations, including attention, perception, working memory, and long-term memory storage (Baddeley, 2007). Attention allows learners to focus on relevant language stimuli, while perception helps in recognizing and interpreting linguistic patterns. Working memory plays a critical role in temporarily holding and manipulating language information, such as vocabulary, syntax, and phonological structures, during communication or learning tasks. Long-term memory, in turn, stores these linguistic forms for future retrieval and use.

This theory suggests that effective second language learning is not a passive activity but a dynamic process requiring repeated and meaningful exposure to language input. The shift from controlled processing, where learners consciously focus on grammar rules or vocabulary use, to automatic processing, where language use becomes fluent and spontaneous, is a key outcome of this cognitive model. Repetition, practice, and contextualized learning experiences help transfer knowledge from short-term awareness to long-term procedural memory, enabling more fluent and accurate language use over time.

Another influential theoretical contribution in this domain is Krashen's Input Hypothesis, which complements the cognitive model by emphasizing the nature and quality of the linguistic input learners receive. According to Krashen (1982), language is acquired, not simply learned, when learners are exposed to comprehensible input that is slightly beyond their current level of linguistic competence, a concept he termed as "i+1." This input must be both understandable and meaningful, enabling the brain to process it effectively without overwhelming the learner. Importantly, Krashen stresses that input alone is not sufficient; it must occur in a low-anxiety, motivationally supportive environment that encourages risk-taking, experimentation, and natural interaction. In such settings, learners are more cognitively open and emotionally prepared to absorb and internalize new linguistic structures.

Together, the Information Processing Model and Krashen's Input Hypothesis illustrate how cognitive mechanisms and appropriate input conditions converge to support second language acquisition. They highlight the importance of structured exposure, cognitive readiness, and psychological safety in promoting deeper linguistic processing and eventual fluency in a second language.

2.2 Linguistic Perspectives on Language Structure and Competence

From a linguistic standpoint, Noam Chomsky's theory of Universal Grammar (UG) underlies much of the psycholinguistic inquiry into second language acquisition. Chomsky (1965) proposed that all humans are born with

an innate set of grammatical principles shared across all languages, known as Universal Grammar. This theory posits that the ability to acquire language is hardwired into the human brain, making language learning a biologically determined process rather than one entirely dependent on environmental exposure. Chomsky's conceptual distinction between competence, the speaker's internalized, implicit knowledge of the grammatical rules of a language, and performance, the actual use of language in real-time communication, remains foundational in understanding how individuals acquire and use language.

This distinction is particularly relevant in L2 learning, where learners may develop a solid internal grasp of linguistic rules (competence) but encounter challenges in real-world usage (performance) due to factors such as limited input, processing constraints, affective variables, or lack of communicative practice. For example, learners might know how to form complex grammatical structures in theory but fail to use them fluently and accurately in spontaneous speech, especially under pressure or in unfamiliar contexts. This gap often results from cognitive overload, where the simultaneous demands of vocabulary retrieval, grammatical construction, and pronunciation impede fluid language production.

In a complementary way, Interactionist Theories provide a more dynamic and socially grounded view of language learning. Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis suggests that meaningful conversational interaction plays a critical role in facilitating language development. Specifically, when learners engage in real-time communication, they are exposed to feedback, opportunities for clarification, and negotiation of meaning, all of which contribute to linguistic development. These interactions often involve modified input, where more proficient speakers adjust their language to enhance comprehensibility, and output modifications, where learners reformulate their utterances in response to feedback.

Such interactional exchanges are not only beneficial for comprehension but also crucial for noticing gaps in learners' interlanguage, the evolving system of rules that L2 learners construct based on input and their existing linguistic knowledge. Through dialogue and feedback, learners are prompted to recognize discrepancies between their output and target language norms, thereby refining their linguistic accuracy and fluency. This process supports the idea that language acquisition is not a purely internal or static process but is socially mediated, co-constructed, and influenced by communicative necessity.

In sum, while Universal Grammar emphasizes the biological and structural foundations of language learning, Interactionist Theories underscore the importance of social context, communicative engagement, and learner interaction in developing second language proficiency. Together, these perspectives offer a balanced and nuanced understanding of the psycholinguistic mechanisms that shape language acquisition.

2.3 Psycholinguistics in Pedagogical Applications

Integrating psycholinguistic principles into language teaching has significantly reshaped contemporary instructional approaches, fostering the emergence of teaching models that emphasize learner-centered instruction, task-based learning, and the development of communicative competence. These models aim to align teaching strategies with how learners actually process, acquire, and use language, moving away from traditional, grammar-heavy methods toward more interactive, cognitively-informed approaches.

One of the most influential frameworks in this regard is Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which highlights the social nature of learning and the importance of cultural and interpersonal contexts. Central to this theory is the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the range between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance and support from a more knowledgeable peer or instructor (Vygotsky, 1978). This notion emphasizes the importance of scaffolding, a process whereby the teacher provides tailored support that is gradually withdrawn as the learner becomes more competent. In the context of second language learning, this means creating learning experiences that include structured interaction, guided practice, and strategic feedback. These interactions not only aid linguistic development but also promote learner autonomy and confidence, especially when learners are encouraged to take active roles in constructing meaning through collaborative dialogue.

Complementing Vygotsky's view, Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (1990) adds a critical dimension to our understanding of how linguistic input is transformed into intake. According to Schmidt, learners cannot acquire language features they do not consciously notice. This means that awareness and attention are prerequisites for language acquisition, particularly in formal learning settings. For teachers, this hypothesis implies that instruction must be designed to highlight salient language features, such as grammatical forms, vocabulary usage, or discourse markers, through techniques like input enhancement, error correction, and metalinguistic explanation. Feedback should not merely correct but also draw learners' attention to the specific form-function relationships they may have overlooked, fostering deeper cognitive engagement with the input.

Together, these theoretical contributions, Vygotsky's emphasis on social interaction and guided learning, and Schmidt's focus on cognitive awareness, form a comprehensive pedagogical framework that bridges the internal processes of language acquisition with the external conditions necessary for effective instruction. This integrated approach recognizes that second language learning is not solely an individual cognitive task, nor merely a product of exposure, but a dynamic interaction between mental processing, social interaction, and instructional design.

When thoughtfully aligned with classroom practice, these psycholinguistic theories empower educators to create responsive, evidence-based environments that support learners' individual needs while fostering active, meaningful language use. They underscore the value of interactive teaching methods that not only respect the mental architecture of learning but also cultivate the social dimensions of communication, ultimately leading to more effective and enduring second language acquisition.

3. The role of Psycholinguistics in language acquisition development

Language acquisition is a complex and developmental process that depends on a constellation of universal cognitive and neurobiological mechanisms. These mechanisms are not isolated to the memorization of vocabulary or the mechanical application of grammar rules; rather, they operate at multiple levels of human cognition, integrating memory, attention, categorization, and pattern recognition to support the understanding and use of language in meaningful contexts. Successful language acquisition requires both the mastery of linguistic structures, such as phonology, morphology, and syntax, and the ability to employ these structures within discourse, where language is used to convey intention, navigate social interactions, and build meaning through contextualized communication.

Psycholinguistics, as an interdisciplinary field emerging from psychology and linguistics, explores the mental and neurological processes that enable individuals to comprehend, produce, and learn language. It examines how the brain processes incoming linguistic input, how language is stored and retrieved from memory, and how learners internalize language rules. According to White (2021), psycholinguistic inquiry typically centers around three interrelated domains: (1) lexical development, which concerns how individuals acquire and mentally organize vocabulary; (2) syntactic acquisition, which addresses how learners understand and apply the rules governing sentence structure; and (3) communicative competence, which represents the learner's ability to effectively use language in real-world interactions, incorporating both linguistic accuracy and pragmatic appropriateness.

One major contribution of psycholinguistics to language teaching lies in its insights into first language acquisition (L1), particularly in children. Studies have shown that children possess a remarkable capacity to discern the patterns and regularities of their native language at a young age. They develop internal rules and generative frameworks that allow them to form novel and grammatically correct sentences, demonstrating an implicit understanding of syntax and morphology. This ability emerges without explicit instruction, suggesting that language learning is driven by both innate cognitive capacities and rich environmental interaction.

Understanding how children acquire their first language provides educators with valuable implications for SLA. By analyzing these natural processes, teachers can design instruction that aligns with how the human brain naturally learns language. For instance, they can focus on providing rich input, interaction, and meaningful use of language, rather than emphasizing rote memorization or decontextualized drills. Psycholinguistics reveals that language learning is not merely a motor task, such as repeating sounds or copying sentences, but a cognitive and strategic endeavor involving attention to meaning, form, and function. Educators can thus leverage psycholinguistic principles to enhance learner engagement, scaffold linguistic development, and promote deeper, more sustainable language acquisition.

4. The cognitive processes behind language comprehension

Language comprehension is a fundamental aspect of psycholinguistics, focusing on how listeners and readers process, interpret, and assign meaning to linguistic input, whether auditory, visual, or gestural. In this domain, the primary concern is with the receiver of the message, who engages in decoding and interpreting language in real time. Comprehension involves complex mental processes, whereby individuals draw upon their linguistic knowledge, contextual cues, prior experience, and cognitive resources to make sense of the information being communicated.

When individuals participate in structured or engaging linguistic activities, such as listening to a lecture, reading a narrative, or engaging in a stimulating conversation, they often comprehend meaning with remarkable speed and efficiency. This apparent ease is not accidental; rather, it reflects the presence of innate cognitive and linguistic structures that support the rapid processing and interpretation of language. These internal mechanisms allow the

brain to quickly decode input, identify syntactic and semantic patterns, and link these with prior knowledge to generate meaningful interpretations (Tripp & Munson, 2022).

One of the most compelling arguments in favor of these built-in processing systems is the consistency and fluency with which humans understand and produce language across different contexts. This is evident in our ability to transform abstract mental representations, thoughts, intentions, and conceptual ideas, into spoken words or written symbols. During this transformation, individuals convert their ideas into a stream of phonological waveforms through speech or into visual inscriptions via writing, enabling communication with others. Conversely, comprehension requires the listener or reader to reverse this process: to perceive sounds or written symbols and reconstruct the intended meaning behind them.

These processes are not merely mechanical; they are cognitively rich and highly adaptive, allowing for the interpretation of nuance, tone, ambiguity, and context-dependent meaning. For instance, gestures, intonation, and sentence structure all interact to inform the listener's interpretation of a message. Comprehension, therefore, is more than the decoding of isolated words, it is the integration of linguistic form and function within a broader communicative and cognitive framework.

According to Tripp and Munson (2022), this ability highlights the essential psycholinguistic principle that humans possess specialized mental systems enabling them to encode, transmit, and decode complex linguistic information efficiently. These systems account for the fluidity and adaptability of language use in both receptive (listening and reading) and productive (speaking and writing) modalities. Understanding how these systems operate is essential for educators and language practitioners, as it offers crucial insights into how learners can be supported in developing deeper, more accurate comprehension skills in a second language.

5. The competence and performance dichotomy in Psycholinguistics

Psycholinguistics operates within the influential theoretical framework of Noam Chomsky's competence/performance dichotomy, which has shaped much of modern linguistic and cognitive language theory. According to Chomsky, competence refers to an individual's internalized, often subconscious, knowledge of the rules and structure of a language, this includes grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and phonology. Performance, on the other hand, refers to the actual use of language in concrete situations, speaking, writing, and interacting in real time. As Guhe (2020) explains, this distinction underscores the fact that having linguistic knowledge (competence) is not the same as being able to access and apply that knowledge effectively in communication (performance).

In practice, individuals may possess a high degree of linguistic competence, enabling them to understand language passively when reading or listening. However, when it comes to language production, such as speaking or writing, learners must actively engage cognitive mechanisms to retrieve relevant vocabulary, select appropriate syntactic constructions, organize their ideas coherently, and articulate them fluently, all under real-time constraints. This process requires the interaction of several psycholinguistic components, including a mental lexicon (a mental dictionary of words and meanings), a grammar module (internalized rules for structuring sentences), and a performance system or production module that filters and structures the output based on context, intention, and communicative goals (Guhe, 2020). This system must also account for sociolinguistic factors such as register, tone, and audience, which further complicate real-time language generation.

This issue holds particular importance for L2 teachers, as productive language skills, especially speaking, form a core component of communicative competence and real-world language use. Despite this, many L2 learning environments disproportionately emphasize receptive skills, such as reading and vocabulary recognition, often at the expense of productive skills like speaking and writing. Learners may develop a strong passive understanding of the target language, acquiring substantial vocabulary and grammatical awareness, yet remain unable to express themselves fluently in spoken or written form due to lack of consistent practice and meaningful production opportunities.

Several contextual factors contribute to this imbalance. In large classrooms, for example, teachers may struggle to allocate sufficient time for each student to engage in speaking activities. Additionally, institutional assessments often prioritize measurable outcomes such as grammar accuracy or reading comprehension over communicative fluency, leading teachers to focus on these examinable areas rather than interaction-based tasks. As a result, many students plateau at a receptive level, accumulating what could be considered a "passive lexicon" without transitioning to active use of the language.

This has significant implications for language teaching. Without targeted opportunities to practice production, students may never fully develop the ability to internalize and automatize their linguistic knowledge. Psycholinguistic research, therefore, calls for pedagogical approaches that not only build competence but also nurture performance by promoting interactive learning, task-based instruction, and real-time communicative

practice. These methods can help bridge the gap between what learners know and what they are able to do with the language, ultimately enabling them to transition from understanding to fluent expression.

6. The role of psycholinguistics in language teaching

The integration of psycholinguistic principles into language teaching has significantly influenced the development of instructional methodologies that align with the natural cognitive and social processes underlying language acquisition. Unlike traditional approaches that may emphasize rote memorization or structural repetition, psycholinguistically informed methods focus on how learners mentally process, internalize, and apply language in real communicative settings. As Agustin et al. (2021) highlight, effective teaching models must take into account not only the cognitive mechanisms of language learning but also the individual characteristics of both teachers and learners. This includes understanding the learners' psychological traits, cognitive readiness, learning preferences, and motivational factors. Recognizing that each learner has a unique mental and emotional profile, psycholinguistics promotes an empathic, learner-centered perspective, wherein the design of curricula and instructional activities is responsive to the cognitive and affective dynamics of the language classroom.

Contemporary SLA research underscores the importance of facilitating comprehensible input and adjusting instructional pacing to align with the learner's processing capacity. Learners need sufficient time not only to receive language input, through listening, reading, or multimedia, but also to process, interpret, and respond to that input meaningfully. Van and Adie (2020) argue that both input and interactive feedback must be comprehensible and tailored to the learner's current level of competence in order to be effective. This principle reinforces the idea that successful teaching is not merely about delivering information but about creating continuous interaction, where learners are active participants in meaning negotiation. The interactive environment, often created through pair work, group tasks, and dialogic exchanges, helps bridge the gap between passive understanding and active language use.

Because meaningful interaction plays a central role in language learning, scholars have turned attention to the dynamics of group learning, particularly how cooperative learning structures can enhance communicative competence. Understanding how groups are formed, how learners interact within them, and how tasks are distributed has become essential for designing effective collaborative activities. These practices aim to stimulate learners' engagement, curiosity, and willingness to communicate, which are core elements of communicative language teaching and task-based language learning models. When students are emotionally and cognitively engaged, they are more likely to internalize new forms and experiment with language use, thereby accelerating acquisition.

In an effort to enhance language production, numerous studies have examined various forms of learning support, particularly those that target form-focused instruction, feedback, communicative practice, and metalinguistic awareness. These supports may include pre-task planning, guided practice, error correction, and metacognitive strategies. Findings generally indicate that such supports can facilitate more accurate and complex language production, particularly when they help learners focus attention on specific linguistic targets. However, the effectiveness of explicit feedback, presentation modes, and task types appears to vary across studies, indicating that there is no single best method and that instructional design must be adapted to context and learner needs.

From a psycholinguistic perspective, these findings support the idea that the quality of input, rather than just its quantity, is crucial for successful language acquisition. As Anderson et al. (2021) emphasize, optimal learning occurs when learners are not only exposed to rich input but also provided with conditions that enable deep processing of that input. This includes making linguistic input easily processable, breaking it down into manageable chunks, and supporting it with visuals, interaction, and feedback mechanisms that match learners' cognitive capacities. In this light, purely input frequency-based models are insufficient to explain the nuances of second language development; instead, event structure conditions, such as instructional timing, task demands, and social interaction, must be taken into account.

In sum, the contribution of psycholinguistics to language pedagogy lies in its holistic view of the learner as a thinking, feeling, and socially situated individual. It offers a powerful framework for understanding how language is acquired and how teaching can be optimized to support this process, through interactive, adaptive, and cognitively informed strategies that move beyond static instruction to truly engage learners in the construction of linguistic knowledge.

7. Psycholinguistic Principles in language teaching and learning

The applications of psycholinguistic research to language teaching and learning are both broad and impactful, offering valuable insights into how educators can enhance classroom practices without requiring specialized expertise in cognitive science. While language teachers do not need to become psycholinguists, a basic understanding of how the mind processes, stores, and produces language can significantly inform and improve instructional methods. Psycholinguistics provides a scientific foundation for understanding how learners acquire language, what cognitive constraints they face, and how interaction, feedback, and input affect their linguistic development.

One of the most influential psycholinguistic contributions to pedagogy is Krashen's Input Hypothesis, which posits that language is best acquired when learners are exposed to comprehensible input, language that is slightly beyond their current level of competence ($i+1$), yet still understandable with the aid of context, visuals, or prior knowledge. Lichtman and VanPatten (2021) further support this view, arguing that successful language acquisition is most likely to occur in low-anxiety environments where learners feel safe to experiment with language, make errors, and engage in meaningful communication. These conditions allow learners to allocate their cognitive resources more effectively, focusing on understanding and internalizing language rather than managing stress or fear of failure. Teachers, therefore, can facilitate acquisition by designing lessons that emphasize contextualized language use, scaffolded input, and supportive classroom atmospheres.

In parallel, the Interaction Hypothesis, rooted in the work of second language researchers and supported by contemporary dialogue studies, emphasizes the role of social interaction in language development. According to Pickering and Garrod (2021), language learning is not solely an individual cognitive endeavor but also a socially situated activity that depends on real-time, interactive communication. Through negotiation of meaning, clarification requests, and feedback, learners are encouraged to notice linguistic gaps in their own output and refine their internal representations of language. This dynamic interaction promotes not only accuracy but also fluency, as learners are exposed to naturalistic language use and given opportunities to actively construct meaning.

Furthermore, psycholinguistic insights advocate for the integration of real-world tasks and authentic communicative scenarios into the classroom. These tasks mirror the types of interactions learners are likely to encounter outside the academic setting, thereby enhancing the ecological validity of instruction. For example, role plays, interviews, debates, and project-based learning create situations where language is used purposefully and spontaneously, allowing learners to draw upon both their linguistic competence and communicative strategies in a meaningful way.

In sum, the intersection of psycholinguistic theory and pedagogical practice empowers teachers to make informed instructional decisions, from designing materials and choosing input to structuring interaction and providing feedback. By grounding teaching in an understanding of how learners acquire and process language, educators can create more engaging, effective, and cognitively aligned learning environments that support learners' progression from comprehension to confident, autonomous language use.

8. Conclusion

The study of second language acquisition through a psycholinguistic lens reveals a rich and multifaceted understanding of how learners internalize, process, and utilize language. By integrating insights from cognitive psychology, linguistic theory, and educational practice, this research underscores the importance of aligning language teaching methods with the natural mental processes that underlie comprehension and production. Psycholinguistic frameworks such as Chomsky's competence and performance distinction, Krashen's Input Hypothesis, and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory highlight the roles of memory, attention, interaction, and scaffolding in language development.

One of the central findings of this study is the necessity of providing learners with meaningful, comprehensible input in environments that reduce anxiety and foster engagement. Furthermore, the evidence supports the view that interaction and feedback are not merely supplementary but essential components in promoting language awareness, refining output, and enhancing fluency. Equally important is recognizing the cognitive load involved in producing language in real-time, which calls for instructional designs that balance receptive and productive skills, and that are tailored to learners' psychological and developmental readiness.

Ultimately, this research advocates for a pedagogical shift toward learner-centered, communicative, and cognitively informed teaching strategies. Psycholinguistics empowers educators to move beyond traditional rote learning toward methods that respect the complexities of human language acquisition. By embracing these insights, language teachers can create more dynamic, inclusive, and effective learning environments, ones that nurture not only linguistic competence but also communicative confidence and lifelong language skills.

9. References

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