THE EXPECTATIONS OF ENGLISH AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN SLA THEORIES COURSES

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Abstract:

This study investigated the expectations of English as foreign language students in second language acquisition (SLA) theories courses. Foreign language learners expected that all second language acquisition courses would assist them in their foreign language learning or acquisition process. This research attempts to reveal the application of these SLA theories in real-life situations when learning and acquiring English as a foreign language. This qualitative and quantitative study included 40 participants studying Languages and translation at the University of Tabuk in Saudi Arabia. This study used Brown's (2000) framework and principles of language learning. The researcher used three research instruments; questionnaires, an observation checklist, and a semi-structured interview. The findings of the study showed that Many learners were interested and concerned with the relevance of the SLA theories course to their foreign language learning process within the classroom setting and in real-life situations (natural and unnatural settings). In addition, they expected these theories to be supportive and helpful in assisting them to learn the English language as a foreign or second language, which is almost not possible in reality and is not merely practical but rather theoretical. The study recommends that educationists and decision-makers be concerned with developing and designing materials relevant to the application of SLA theories in teaching and learning English as a foreign language.

Keywords: SLA theories, EFL, expectations, acquisition

1. Introduction

Teacher-students' SLA theories courses have been a significant component in ESL / EFL learning practices (Paige, 2021). Previous research has provided much attention to SLA theories in the setting of English as a second language (L2). Many scholars have observed the effectiveness of SLA theories in second language acquisition (Archibald, 2005; Bailey, Madden, and Krashen, 1974; Birdsong, 2006; Lightbown and Spada, 2008). A review of

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related literature shows contrasting views on the roles of the participants and the contribution of SLA theories to the EFL learning process (VanPatten et al, 2020).

In addition, the current research investigates the expectations of English Language and Literature students of second language acquisition theories and their perceptions when learning EFL (Brown, 1977). Much focus has been given to the practice of teacher-student in SLA theories courses. What do English Language and Literature students expect from SLA theories in their learning process? The answer to this question is not given by current research studies on SLA theories' courses. Past research has given attention to the teacher's perspective (Bao et al., 2021). The main goal of this existing study is to explore the expectations and perceptions of SLA theories from the students 'perspectives. With this goal, this research sets out to investigate the expectations of final-year graduates who have undergone a course on SLA theories at the Department of languages and translation at the University of Tabuk.

2. Review of Related Literature

Language learning or acquisition is related to the process that learners develop in acquiring and learning both first and second languages. This process needs an effective interaction with the target language in real-life situations where the learners are interested not only in the shape of their spoken words but also in the messages they comprehend or process (Dulay et al., 1974a; and Douglas, 2014). The process of error correction and meaningful learning of language rules are not related to SLA, but native speakers of the language may change their spoken words to assist language learners to comprehend them, and these changes are sought to assist them to acquire the language successfully (Ellis, 1988; and Wang et al., 2020).

As far as second language acquisition theories are concerned, much research has been conducted in this area. Such research provided a variety of definitions that relate to the term second language acquisition. Hakuta (1977) defines the term as the process of learning and using a second language. Research in second language acquisition has been conducted since the early 1970s. These researches have discussed many topics within different areas including performance analysis, discourse analysis, error analysis, and contrastive analysis (Selinker, 1972; Ellis, 2008; Saville-Troike et al., 2016).

Second language acquisition theories investigations have discussed the effect of many factors in language learning. Relevant research provided attention to the aspects of grammatical morpheme and pronunciation acquisition. According to Ellis (1997), the process of learning a language is based on the learners' abilities and linguistic situations. The findings of their study showed that learners who are higher in age face a high level of metalinguistic abilities compared to those young age learners. Other research provided attention to different areas of learners' interest including grammar and pronunciation. Singleton (2003) conducted a study and found out that young learners are far better at acquiring second language lexical items in the end compared to those learners who are older than they are.

On the other hand, Birdsong (2006) investigated age-related research on second language acquisition and found that there is a strong relationship between learning situations, the speed of second language processing, and the age factor. The findings of his study indicated that the cognitive process and the morphological changes varied and depended on the learners themselves in terms of being teenagers or adults. These researches demonstrate the significance of SLA theories when learning or acquiring a first and second language. Some first or second-language learners do not feel confident with learning language acquisition and might be anxious by encountering SLA teachers immediately with their second-language acquisition theories' implications while learning. Little research has been conducted on foreign language acquisition learners' expectations of SLA theories. The current research studies have examined the impact of SLA theories on second language learners' consequent disadvantages. That is, language acquisition is more associated with the growth of first language abilities whilst learning relates to the expansion of second language abilities.

Brown (2000) states that there are several merits in second language acquisition at an early age and only a few pieces of evidence to support the assumption that adults are unsuccessful learners of the second language. Scholars such as Sandra (1999) indicated that the advantages of SLA in first and second language learning are useful for both young and adult learners. Richard and Schmidt (2002) conducted a study and found out that the strong link between age and development in second language acquisition SLA is very complicated which refers to the phase during which a learner can acquire language easily, successfully, and independently without instructions.

To conclude based on the SLA theories' research, it has been observed that these theories play an important role in the first and second language learning process (Fillmore, 1976; Schulz, 2019; Al-Hoorie, et al., 2020; Md Rabiul et al., 2021; and Kim et al., 2022). However, to what extent SL learners can benefit from the SLA theories course depends on the implications, practicality, and flexibility of the participants' use of these theories. Based on the findings of the previous research, the present research intends to the following research objectives:

1) To examine languages and translation students' expectations from SLA theories in their learning process.
2) To analyze whether students' expectations contribute to their first and second language learning process.

3. Research Methods

This study was conducted at the University of Tabuk in Saudi Arabia. SLA course is required for a selected group of students in the final year. All final-year Bachelor students must take a second language acquisition course as a requirement. In addition, they are required to cover a variety of topics on second language acquisition in which SLA theories are one of these components. In this course, students cover many SLA theories that relate to their language acquisition and reflect their EFL learning process. This study included 40 graduates doing their B. A degree in languages and translation at the

University of Tabuk in Saudi Arabia (20 males and 20 females). All of them were homogenous in terms of socio-cultural background (native language-Arabic, educational system, race, and nationality). The data were elicited from the participants through a questionnaire survey, observation checklist, and interview.

3.1 Design of the Research Study

This quantitative and qualitative study included a questionnaire, an observation checklist, and an interview. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section related to the student's demographic data including age, gender, home country, and native language. The second section encouraged participants to respond concerning their experiences with SLA theories, such as the number of classes they have taken, the activities in SLA, and the application of SLA theories. The third section asked for the participants' expectations of SLA theories. In the second and third sections, the researcher developed multiple-choice and open sets of questions to collect more data. The choices in the questionnaires were designed in relevance to graduates' experience and background in SLA courses, interaction with students, lecturers, and related literature on SLA theories.

At the beginning of every semester, the researchers encouraged the students to write about their experiences with their previous SLA theories course to attain more understanding of the students. In addition, the researchers also conducted informal surveys with SLA students when giving classes by helping them take notes and write down questions related to their concerns and expectations of SLA theories. Conducting classes and workshops for students and discussing these SLA theories with other lecturers provided the researchers with appropriate insights into students' expectations. The survey took about 130 minutes, which is the normal time for the lecture. 40 students completed the survey, which includes the 20 focus students who agreed to conduct the interview. To validate the research instrument, the researchers also conducted a qualitative interview with 20 focus students before they met their lecturer for the SLA theories course. When the 20 focus students arranged their SLA class, they were interviewed about their expectations of the SLA theories course before they met their lecturer for the lecture. In the interview, the researchers also validated participants' responses by encouraging them to spell out why they have selected that choice in the survey. For example, the researchers inquired from them?" Why have you selected this choice?" "I expect my SLA lecturer to show me the appropriate SLA theory for learning EFL?" "Why do you want to ask your lecturer about the appropriateness of SLA theories?" "Are you unsure of their appropriateness?"

4. Discussion

Out of the 40 participants, 20 were males and 20 were females as presented in Figure 1.1 in the following section. All of them were native speakers of the Arabic language and Saudi nationality. Their age was ranging from 20 to 22 years. At the time of conducting

the survey, all of them were final-year students (100%). The second section of the survey elicits data about the EFL students' experience with SLA classes.

All of them (100%) stated that they had taken SLA classes only at the university education level but not any earlier. When asked about their activities in SLA classes, they reported discussing the different SLA theories, the use, and application of these theories in real-life situations, and the importance of SLA theories in English as foreign language acquisition. Figure 1 displays the percentage of the participants in the study as mentioned earlier.
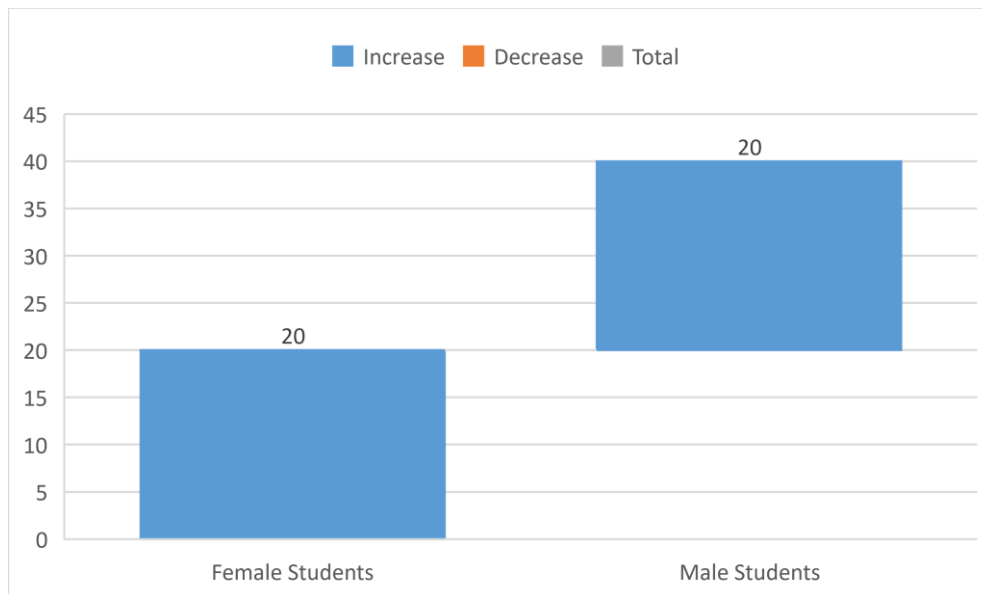
Figure 1: The Participants in the Study

Therefore, Figure (2) depicts the distribution of participants based on their gender. As indicated 20 female and 20 male students participated in the investigation making about 50% frequency each.
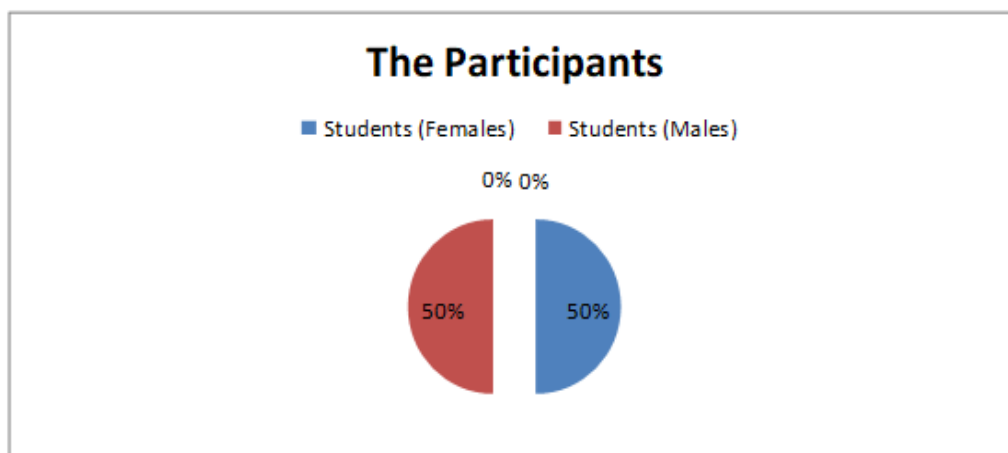

Figure 2: The Distribution of Participants based on Gender

They also reported that they discussed the effectiveness and application of SLA theories with their lecturer receiving suggestions on how to use these theories in acquiring and learning EFL. For these EFL postgraduate students, their previous SLA classes were very limited, particularly at the school education level than their current experience at the postgraduate level. 100% of the postgraduate students had never taken any SLA classes before their university-level education. Considering the length of learning EFL for these postgraduates, it was observed very clearly that most EFL students must have experienced English language classes rather than SLA classes at their pre-university education level.

The activities, which are common practices in SLA classrooms, especially discussions and providing suggestions, were familiar to the majority of EFL postgraduate students. Most of the students expressed that they enjoyed discussing SLA theories with the lecturer privately and they do not think that all SLA theories apply to acquiring and learning English as a foreign language. These expectations were revealed by both genders (male and female students).

In the interview, many EFL postgraduates expressed their strong feelings and attitudes to improve their language learning and acquisition. Explicitly, more EFL students would expect the lecturer to tell them how to apply SLA theories in learning and acquiring EFL. This is not surprising as EFL postgraduates are more concerned about the development of their EFL learning process. This was the case almost for all the postgraduate students. The results of the present research support Lightbown and Spada's (2008) conclusion that all ESL and EFL learners expected that all second language acquisition courses would assist them in their first and second language acquisition process.

Although a few EFL learners were intimidated by the use of SLA theories through learning in real-life situations because SLA theories as stated were not practical enough for some of them and a little bit insecure to talk to their lecturers about the usefulness of SLA theories. The findings of the elicited data from the questionnaires and the interviews have indicated an explicit picture of the EFL learners' expectations of SLA theories. Many learners were interested and concerned with the relevance of the SLA theories course to their second language learning process within the classroom setting and in real-life situations (natural and unnatural settings).

They expected these theories to be supportive and helpful in assisting them to learn the English language as a foreign or second language which is almost not possible in reality and is not practical but rather theoretical. This expectation agrees with the results of the previous research, which has examined SLA theories' implications in the second language learning process. Learners in many of these researches demonstrated strong opinions about learning a language through practice, which is a process that contains the notion of different theories on second language acquisition issues (Richard and Schmidt, 2002). Likewise, EFL learners in this research expected the SLA theories course to help them acquire and learn a second language. Therefore, it is unexpected that SLA learners possessed similar desires in the SLA theories course.

In addition, many learners in the SLA theories course felt like asking their lecturer about the point of teaching and conducting SLA theories courses. This can be explained by their willingness to know about the use of SLA theories courses in learning the English language. The findings indicated their unfamiliarity with some of these theories, as revealed in the relevant part of the questionnaires. Although the application of each SLA theory is commonly provided in a classroom discussion or lecture, it is explicit that these learners desire to clarify the function and use of these theories in real-life situations with the lecturer in the classroom. It should also be observed that most SLA learners experienced this expectation despite the reality that they had discussed SLA theories in many classes earlier.

As shown in the first part of the questionnaires, the SLA theories course was the first university-level course for all English Language and Literature students. They may have felt that learning and acquiring the English Language at the university level is different from learning at the high school level and expected to inquire about the implication and use of SLA theories in real-life situations. Another thing is that many SLA theories' course learners are expected to reveal their abilities to their SLA lecturers, rather than observing the lecturers while EFL lecturers are expected to realize learners' performance and interaction and help them learn or acquire a second language. Most SLA theories courses pointed out, that if these theories have been brought into reality; it would have felt more appropriate and useful to deploy them in a natural learning setting.

In the semi-structured interviews, when EFL learners were asked whether they had anything to inform the lecturer in the classroom, most of them indicated that they only had the desire to realize what the lecturer encouraged them to do. Such expectation refers to SLA learners' expectations of the SLA theories course. As demonstrated in the second part of the questionnaire, most SLA learners possess experience with SLA theories at the university level. In their discussion about the SLA theories course, most of them indicated that the EFL lecturer provided them with advice on how to get used to SLA theories in their learning process.

Other elements that affected EFL learners' expectations are the learners' SLA learning process and their perceptions of the SLA theories course. For EFL learners who did not obtain enough clarification of SLA theories, approximately 30% showed a tendency to depend more on the lecturers' discussion and explanation in the classroom. Most of the EFL learners interviewed, approximately 70%, indicated that the SLA theories' course is useful, but the lecturer's discussion and explanation are more constructive and trustworthy as depicted in bi-chart 1.2.
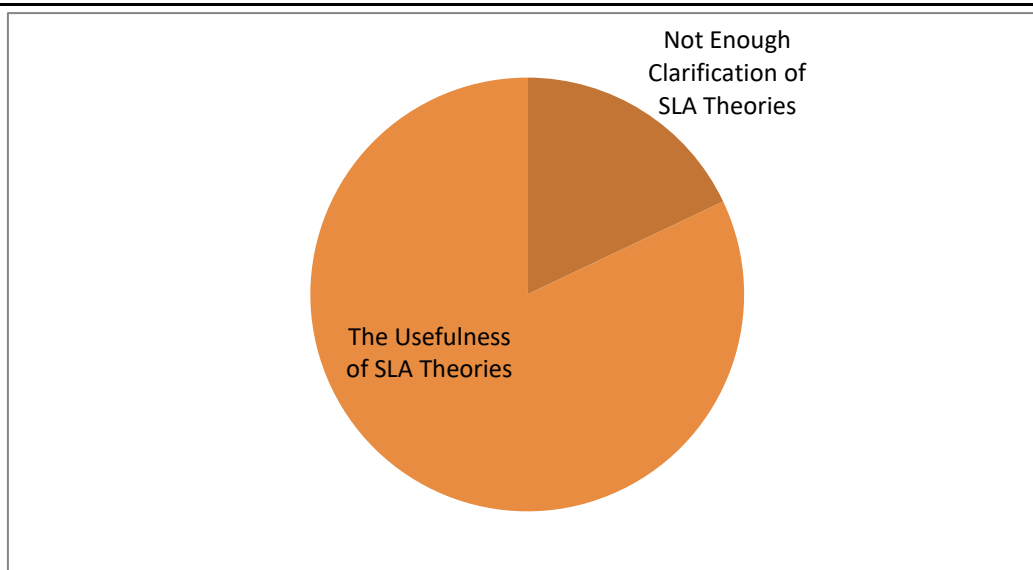
Figure 3: The Perception of EFL Learners of SLA Theories Course

This is because he attempted to create real-life situations for learning the language applies as relevant to SLA theories as part of the classroom discussion. This agrees with Brown's (2000) findings on the usefulness of SLA theories in second language learning and acquisition.

5. Conclusions

Learners of SLA theories courses at the university level expect these theories to be appropriate and supportive in learning a second language. SLA learners, who do not have enough experience and familiarity with SLA theories, expect the lecturer to inform them on what to do to use these theories in learning and acquiring a first or second language. These SLA learners' expectations are shaped by elements beyond individual preferences. This research indicates that both their present and earlier experiences in SLA courses, their learning process, and their perception of the different types of SLA theories affect SLA learners' attitudes and perceptions of SLA theories courses. Although SLA lecturers do not significantly support their teaching by accepting all of their SLA learners' requirements, they must listen to their SLA learners and include SLA expectations in SLA classes. On the other hand, as Birdsong (2006) demonstrates, SLA lecturers and course input, which were dependent on the teacher made SLA learners very reliant and passive. Further future research should investigate how SLA lecturers can appropriately fit into the real needs and requirements of SLA courses to include more SLA learners' autonomy and to double the benefits of SLA theories' courses.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Hani Al Amri is an Assistant Professor in Linguistics at the University of Tabuk, Saudi Arabia. He has been working in the field of Linguistics for many years. He is specialized in languages, linguistics, discourse analysis, EFL, ESL, and related fields.

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