AL 8250 Second Language Acquisition

Instructor: Nan Jiang, Ph.D.

Office Hours: Monday 11:00-1:00, Thursday 4:00-6:00 & by appointment
Office: Room 1247, 34 Peachtree St. | Office Phone Number: 404-651-2936
Email: njiang@gsu.edu | Course Web Page: http://www.gsu.edu/~eslnxj/8250/8250.html

A. GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

This course is intended as an introduction to the field of second language acquisition (SLA) for graduate students. We will examine linguistic, sociolinguistic, and psycholinguistic processes involved in adult second language acquisition, with a focus on learning English as a second language. We will also explore some learner factors that affect SLA. The course aims to help students achieve the following objectives:

-- understand the differences between adult second language acquisition and child first language development,
-- become knowledgeable of the history of the field and the various methods used in SLA research,
-- understand how the learner’s first language, L2 input, and instruction affect SLA,
-- become familiar with major SLA theories and models that seek to explain the relationship between L1, input and instruction and the development of L2 proficiency,
-- understand how SLA may be affected by learner factors such as age, motivation, language aptitude, personality, and cognitive style.
-- develop the ability to read the literature on the covered topics critically,
-- develop an understanding and positive attitude toward second language learning and second language users.

B. COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING

1. Attendance, Tardiness and Participation

Regular attendance, punctuality, and active participation are critical to your success in this class. Class roll will be taken at the beginning of or during class. If you are late, it is your responsibility to let me know you are in class. You may receive a grade of F if you have more than two unexcused absences or if you are late for class seven or more times. I suggest that you contact me before you have to be late or miss a class and tell me about the reason so that I can determine whether your tardiness or absence should be excused. The best way to contact me is by Email (see my Email address above), but you can also reach me at 404-651-2936 or call The Department of Applied Linguistics & ESL at 404-651-3650 and leave a message.

2. Critique (15%)

Each student is required to complete a critique of the research articles we discuss in class. The main purpose of the critique is to encourage you to read SLA research articles closely and critically. It is also intended as a means to urge you to take an active role in class discussion, and help you practice presentation and discussion skills. The critique should have the following two components:

a. Oral part: You will be given 15-20 minutes for summarizing and critiquing the article and 5-10 minutes for leading class discussion. Be prepared to answer questions from other members of the class.

b. Written part: You need to turn in a written critique at the end of the class on the day we discuss that article. It should be 3 to 4 double-spaced pages (font size 10 to 12).

Both the oral and written parts of your critique should include the following information:

a. reference information: author(s), year of publication, title, journal name, etc. (List the reference in APA style at the top of your written critique.

b. the purpose and the research question: what is the purpose of the study or the specific
research question under investigation? Explain important concepts and definitions if necessary.

c. method information: participants (age, L1, L2, L2 level), materials, design, tasks/procedures, dependent variable, independent variable,

d. results, findings, and conclusions: results from the study, summary of findings, the author's interpretation of the findings and conclusions.

e. your comments on and evaluation of the study. Here are some of the questions you can consider when you critique the study: Was the method appropriate? Is the author’s interpretation or explanation of the findings reasonable? Do you know of any conflicting evidence? Do the findings seem to be consistent with your intuition or experience as a second language learner or teacher? What pedagogical implications do you think the findings have?

3. Interview with a second language learner (15%).

Each student is required to conduct an interview with an L2 learner or write a reflective report of their own experiences as an L2 learner. The purpose of this assignment is to help you look at SLA from a learner's perspective. You may choose any topic related to SLA. Make sure you know what you want from the interview and try to focus the interview on a specific area/topic. Construct a list of questions closely related to the topic before the interview and stay focused on that topic during the interview. It is always a good idea to ask the interviewee to provide a specific incident or anecdote to support his or her answer. The following are some sample questions. They are not intended as a complete list of questions for an interview.

-- When you first started learning English, what aspect of the language did you find most difficult?
-- Do you think it is important to know the translation in your language in order to really understand the meaning of an English word?
-- In retrospect, what do you think you could have done to improve your English?
-- What aspect of the language (e.g., grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, idioms) do you think you need to improve most now?
-- What do you do now to improve your English?

-- Do you feel comfortable talking with native speakers?
-- How often does it happen that you feel you are misunderstood by a native speaker? What do you do when it happens?
-- Can you describe an incident of miscommunication between you and a native speaker?
-- Do you sometimes find yourself constructing an utterance in your mind before you speak?

-- Do you think your first language plays an important role in using English?
-- Do you sometimes use a bilingual dictionary?
-- When you read English, do you sometimes have to use your L1 to help you understand?
-- Do you sometimes find yourself translating from your L1 when you speak or write English?
-- Do you take notes mostly in your first language, mostly in English, or in both languages?
-- Do you think you are actually thinking in English?

You are expected to present the results of your interview or reflective thinking to class and turn in a written report, which should be 3-5 double-spaced pages in length. A sign-up sheet will be distributed in class for you to pick an oral report date. The written report is due on the day of your oral report. Your report should include, a) factual information such as whom you interviewed, when and where it was conducted, how long it lasted, and some background information about the interviewee, such as his or her first language, number of years of English learning, number of years of residence in this country, b) an explanation of the purpose or topic of the interview, and c) a summary of the outcomes of the interview, d) a summary of what you learned from the interview.

4. Midterm Test (20%).

A take-home midterm test will be given in the eighth week and is due at the beginning of class on April 15.

5. Term Paper Outline (10%) and Term Paper (40%).
The term paper is intended as an opportunity for you to examine an SLA area or topic in a more detailed manner than we can do in class. Extensive critical reading and thinking and integration of materials are the keys to a successful term project. Four general topics and some guidelines are listed below, but feel free to choose any SLA topic you are interested in. You are encouraged to come and talk to me about your project at any stage of the project. Don’t hesitate to make an appointment with me if my office hours don’t fit with your schedule.

a. Critique an SLA model or compare two or more SLA models or theories. If you choose this topic, your paper should include the following elements:
   -- Identification of the major proponent(s) of the theory and major works related to the theory.
   -- Summaries of the major claims of the theory and their related research evidence.
   -- Evaluation of the theory in terms of its strengths and weaknesses. For example, what research findings can’t be account for by this theory?
   -- Suggestions of what can be done to improve or modify the theory.

In addition to the above, you also need to discuss the similarities and differences of the theories if you are comparing two or more theories.

b. Review an SLA area or topic. This topic requires that you review and critique the research done in a particular area or on a specific topic. A good review paper should
   -- summarize and compare different views on and different approaches to the topic,
   -- highlight the most important findings on the topic,
   -- indicate how the topic or area has evolved and developed historically, and
   -- offer your own suggestions and opinions regarding this topic, such as the limitations of a theory or an approach, a specific research question that has not been addressed, a potential research paradigm or method to be used to investigate the topic, an issue or question that should have received more attention.

c. Propose a research project. If you have an idea for a research project resulting from reading and class discussion, you are encouraged to consider writing a project proposal for the term paper. You don’t have to complete the project. The proposal should include
   -- a brief review of the literature on the topic,
   -- a statement of a specific research question to be investigated, or the hypothesis to be tested,
   -- a description of the instruments, materials, and design of the project,
   -- a description of the expected outcomes and discussion of how such outcomes may help advance our knowledge about the topic.

d. Complete a research project. If you’d like to complete a research project related to the topics we cover in this course, you can write a report on the project for the term paper. A project report should contain all the first three elements of a project proposal. In addition, you should also present the data, summarize and highlight the findings, and discuss your interpretations of the findings and their significances. It is strongly recommended that you come and talk to me before you begin the project.

A detailed outline of your term paper is required. It should provide enough information for me to know what the topic is, what issues you will review or investigate, and how you will organize the materials so that I can provide feedback. It is due in class on April 19.

A term paper on the first two topics should include a minimum of 15 references. Use at least 10 if you choose the third and fourth topics. The paper should be 10 to 12 double-spaced pages in length and it should follow the APA style. It is due by 5:00 p.m. on May 10.


I consider content, organization, and language in my evaluation of your assignments. This course has a total of 100 points divided among the assignments as shown by the percentage in the parentheses. Your letter grade for this course will be determined by the total points you receive using the following criteria: A = 90 – 100, B = 80 – 89, C = 70 – 79, F< 70.

C. OTHER COURSE-RELATED ISSUES

1. Participation in Research Projects and Extra Credit.

Students will have opportunities to serve as participants in research projects throughout the semester. This participation is an important way of learning how SLA research is conducted. In addition,
you will receive 2 bonus points for each experiment you participate in. A student can do no more than two experiments. A sign-up sheet will be distributed in class when participants are needed.

2. Late Assignments.
   No late assignments are accepted unless you arrange with me to turn in an assignment late prior to its due date.

3. Plagiarism.
   Plagiarism carries serious penalties at this university. Do not use the works or ideas of others without proper acknowledgement (i.e., documentation). Do not submit a paper written, in whole or in part, by another and present it as your own. See the Policy on Academic Honesty in the Graduate Catalog for more information.