Key Terms in Second Language Acquisition
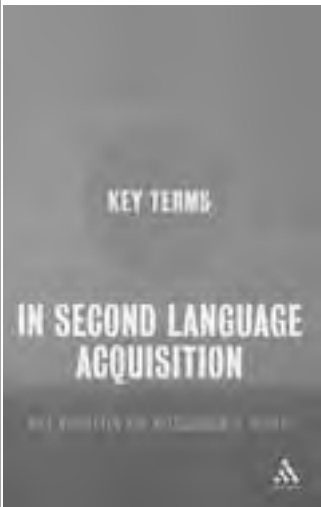
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Key Terms in Second Language Acquisition			
Author:	Bill VanPatten and Alessandro G. Benati (2010)		
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Over the last five decades, second language acquisition (SLA) research has encompassed a multitude of complex issues, and few books give a clear and concise overview of the state and the goals of this growing field. In *Key Terms in Second Language Acquisition*, Bill VanPatten and Alessandro Benati provide a much-needed introduction to the main issues, concepts, and works currently shaping SLA. The book can be used as a textbook for undergraduate and graduate introductory courses in SLA or as a handy reference for second/foreign language teachers and SLA scholars.

VanPatten and Benati organize the book into four main parts: an introduction, a section on key issues in SLA, a part of key terms and definitions in SLA, and a list of key readings in the field. Each part provides brief highlights of the main ideas and people associated with the topic under discussion. In addition, each section not only defines the important concepts but also gives a balanced account of the various competing perspectives and approaches. This is helpful both for the novices who are not familiar with SLA research and for the experts who might need a quick reference to a complex issue.

The Introduction defines SLA and provides a brief history of the field. The authors note that SLA is used as the umbrella term for language learning that occurs both in the contexts where the target language is and is not spoken outside the classroom. Language teachers who are familiar with the English as a Second Language (ESL) versus English as a Foreign Language (EFL) distinction might find the one umbrella term surprising. However, VanPatten and Benati explain that using one term is appropriate because learners use the same mental processes in both situations. The authors also present the history of SLA decade-by-decade starting with the 1970s. This helps readers see how the field has progressed through the last fifty years and what movements are currently shaping it. While the book makes a distinction between SLA and second language teaching, it also emphasizes the connection between the two fields. Furthermore, the authors argue that second language teaching should be informed by SLA. The introduction ends with an overview of the book that helps readers navigate through the next sections.

The second part, "Key Issues in SLA," highlights nine major issues in current SLA research. They are framed as questions dealing with the nature of initial state, the possibility of learners becoming native-like, the critical period, the developing system, the role of explicit and implicit learning, the role of input and output, the function of individual differences, the effect of instruction, and the constraints on SLA. All nine topics are discussed and organized in a similar fashion. The authors define and introduce each issue and then present the main positions taken by various researchers. The description of each topic ends with an assessment section highlighting the problems with the current research and directions for future investigation. The descriptions of the competing approaches are accompanied by important definitions that can be found in the "Key Terms" section, as well as important scholars and empirical studies that are referenced in the "Key Readings" part. This makes the material accessible both to SLA experts who can quickly browse through the nine topics, as well as to readers who are not as familiar with SLA or who may want further information on the issues.

"Key Terms in SLA" is the most substantial part of the book. It contains over a hundred important terms commonly found in SLA research ranging from Accessibility Hierarchy to working memory. Some of them refer to more theoretical notions (Universal Grammar, mental representation, typological universals), while others are of a more practical nature for language teachers (foreigner talk, feedback, individual differences). The authors briefly define the terms, provide examples, and mention important people associated with each item. While the definitions are self-sufficient, readers can access further readings by the main scholars related to each term in "Key Readings."

The last section of the book, "Key Readings," is an extensive reference list of important books and articles ranging from Skinner's (1957) *Verbal Behavior* to recent studies. This is a helpful section for readers who want to learn more about SLA. The readings provided in this part cover and go beyond the issues discussed in the previous sections. Readers looking for additional resources for almost any topic in SLA will most likely find it in this section.

VanPatten and Benati's *Key Terms* effectively summarizes, highlights, and defines the main issues, people, and terms in SLA. The authors present the most relevant information about the field in a clear, comprehensible, and concise manner. In addition, the book is a current and objective overview of SLA, as it presents multiple perspectives on each issue. The organization into four parts with each referring to the others makes the material easy to navigate and access by both novices and experts. Second language teachers will also find the book useful because of the practical ways in which the authors connect SLA and second language teaching. While *Key Terms* does not include a detailed account of the complexity of each issue in the field, it provides readers with the necessary tools to start reading current SLA research. Also, as teachers become more familiar with the principles and processes guiding SLA, they will be able to prepare classes that promote successful language acquisition.

The book is helpful for readers interested in SLA and ESL/EFL teaching, and it can be used in both undergraduate and graduate courses. Its clear and concise overview of the main issues, terms, and people in SLA makes it a must-have reference for anyone in applied linguistics.

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