A short History of SLA: Where have we come from and where are we going?

Rod Ellis

Curtin University

A historical perspective

"it is important to understand ideas at the time they originated" (Larsen-Freeman, 2018): p. 56).

I would add that it is also important to understand how the ideas that motivated a field of enquiry at one time evolved into and were sometimes replaced by ideas later on.

A bit of personal history

- Berlitz school in Spain
- Elementary school in London
- Bush secondary school in Zambia
- Focus on teaching
- Gap between teaching and learning
- MA in Linguistics and Language Teaching (University of Leeds)
- Chomsky and Vygotsky
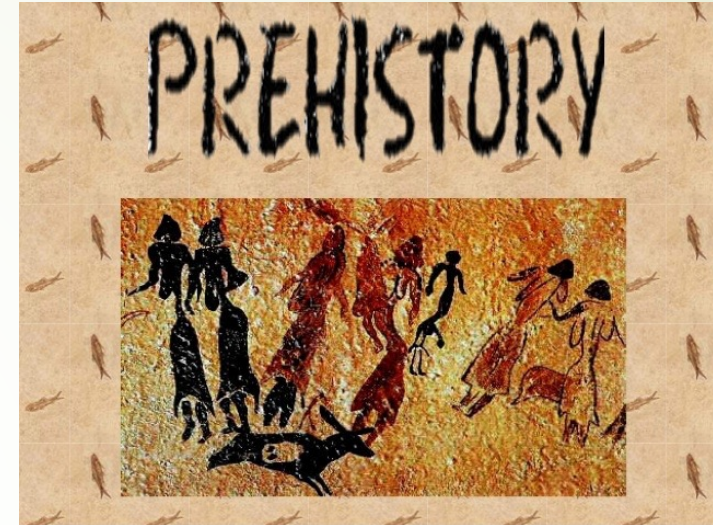
Newmark (1966): "How not to interfere in language learning".

Three phases in my journey with SLA

- The applied phase – theory to practice

- Theory and research - SLA for its own sake

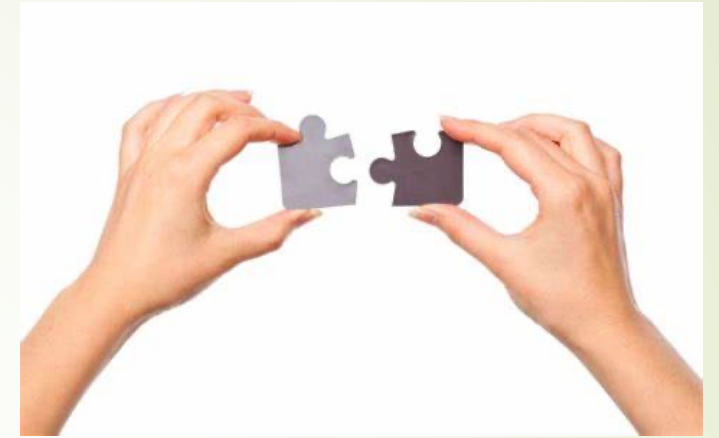- Practice-then theory – SLA as a pedagogical resource

"Classroom second language development" (1984)

"Study of Second language Acquisition" (2008)

"Exploring Language Pedagogy through Second language Acquisition" (with Natsuko Shintani) (2014)

The bifurcation of SLA

SLA began as an applied discipline but separate perspectives have emerged:

- 'applied SLA' continues to address issues of social and, in particular, pedagogical importance

- 'pure SLA' aims to contribute to our understanding of the nature of the human language faculty.

Language Teaching Research and *Instructed Language Acquisition*

Studies in Second Language Acquisition and *Language Learning*

The brief history

Three questions

1. What aspects of L2 acquisition has SLA has focused on?

2. How have researchers investigated L2 acquisition?

3. Why have researchers investigated L2 acquisition?.

What aspects has SLA focused on?

Getting started

Getting started (1960s and 1970s)

	Area of interest	Key findings	Theoretical influences
Order and sequence of acquisition	Dulay and Burt (1973); Cancino, Rosansky and Schumann (1978); Corder (1967)	Just as children acquiring their first language went through clearly marked stages of development, so too do child and adult L2 learners acquire the grammar of an L2 in a more-or-less universal and fixed way- challenge to behaviourist accounts of L2 learning and audiolingual method of teaching.	L1 acquisition research (e.g. Brown, 1973; Klima and Bellugi, 1966).

Expansion period

Expansion period (1980s)

Area of interest	Key studies	Key findings	Theoretical influences
Language transfer	Kellerman (1983); Ringbom (1987)	Language transfer was reconceptualised as a cognitive rather than behaviourist phenomenon; the emphasis was now on the conditions that governed negative and positive transfer and avoidance.	Reaction to both behaviourist accounts and the minimalist position.
Linguistic universals; Universal Grammar	Gass, 1984; White, 1989.	Researchers tested hypotheses drawn from linguistics – in particular whether L2 learners had access to UG. Markedness and universal principles governed both order of acquisition and language transfer.	Linguistic theory: Typological universals - generative grammar -
Second language pragmatics	Thomas 1983; Blum-Kulka et al 1989	The focus was on the comprehension and production of speech acts such as requests and apologies and the identification of pragmatic and pragmalinguistic differences between native and non- native speakers.	Speech act theory; politeness theory.
Input and interaction	Krashen 1985; Long (1983); Swain (1985)	Researchers addressed how the linguistic environment influenced L2 acquisition. Three influential hypotheses: (1) the Input Hypothesis, (2) the Interaction Hypothesis and (3) the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis.	Research on foreigner talk; L1 acquisition research on caretaker talk; discourse analysis.

Cognitive phase

Cognitive phase (late 1990s onwards)

Areas of interest	Key studies	Key findings	Theoretical influences
Consciousness and L2 acquisition; implicit and explicit knowledge; emergentism; skill learning theory	Schmidt (1990); Tomlin and Villa, 1994; N. Ellis, 1994; DeKeyser, 1998)	Conscious attention to exemplars of linguistic features in input and output ('noticing') required for acquisition; implicit and explicit knowledge are fundamentally different with implicit knowledge primary; interface positions.	Cognitive psychology – information processing models; implicit/ explicit knowledge/ learning; Adaptive Control of Thought – Rational Theory (ACT-R)

The social turn

The Social Turn (1990 onwards)

Area of interest	Key studies	Key findings	Theoretical influences
The Social Turn	Firth and Wagner, 1997; Block, 2003; Norton, 2000)	Learners have agency and actively construct their own learning contexts; social identity is crucial; learner-learner interactions are common; learners have local agendas.	Socialization theories e.g. Community of Practice Theory; Poststructuralist theories
Sociocultural SLA	Lantolf (2000); Swain (2006).	Learning commences externally <u>within</u> interaction. Key constructs – mediation; private speech; zone of proximal development; internalisation; collaborative dialogue; 'languaging'; dynamic assessment.	Sociocultural theory – Vygotsky. Sociocognitive theory.

Recent developments

Recent developments

Area of interest	Key studies	Key findings	Theoretical influences
Complex Dynamic Systems Theory	Larsen-Freeman (1997); Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008; de Bot, Lowie and Verspoor, 2007)	Combines social and cognitive perspectives on L2 acquisition; views learning as individualistic and non-linear; interconectedness of multiple variables; predictions about how learning will occur not possible.	Originated in mathematics and science –Catastrophe Theory and Chaos Theory; also influenced by emergentist theories of learning.
The multilingual turn	Cook, 1992); May (2013); Ortega (2009; 2019)	Rejects viewing bilingualism in terms of the development of monolingual competence; makes multilingualism the central area of enquiry and emphasizes the multiple competencies of bi/multilingual learners; translanguaging.	Transdisciplinary

Bibliometric analysis (Zhang, 2019)

| 1997 - 2007	2008-2018
Communicative/ interactive Focus on form Social SLA	Communicative/ interactive (shrunk) Social SLA Sociocultural SLA Individual differences Vocabulary

Some generalizations

1. Old aspects get revisited in new ways, drawing on an increasing range of theoretical perspectives.

2. SLA has become increasingly transdisciplinary and fragmented.

3. Correspondingly, theories have multiplied. While some theories have lost followers over the years (e.g. Krashen's Monitor Model), many have survived (e.g. Long's Interaction Hypothesis). Tensions exist among SLA researchers regarding the desirability of multiple theories.

4. Difference exist regarding the overall orientation of SLA with some researchers clinging to a purely cognitive view of L2 acquisition (see, for example, Long and Doughty, 2003), others to a social view (e.g. Firth and Wagner, 1997; 2007), and still others adopting a broader socio-cognitive position (e.g. Atkinson, 2014).

5. Not all SLA researchers have been interested in pedagogical applications; not all theories (Universal Grammar being one) have much to say to teachers.

How have researchers investigated L2 acquisition?

Empirical Evidence is that which is obtained through study, research, and observation.
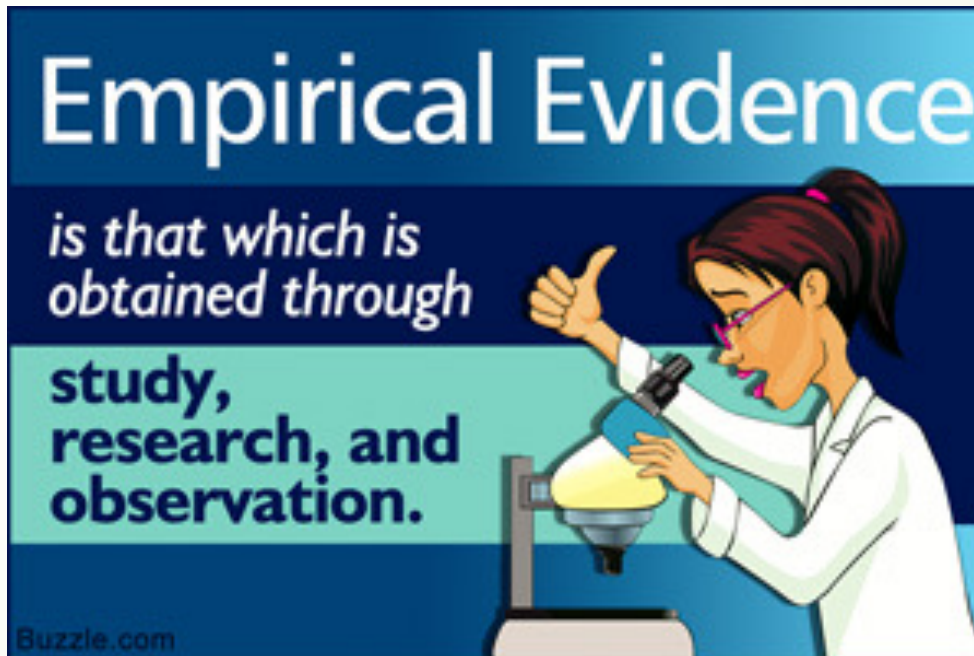
Versatility in methods
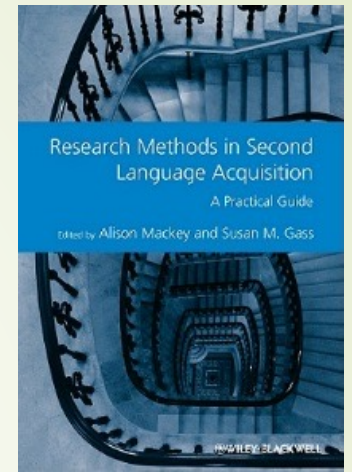
Concurrent with the growth of SLA as it drew on an ever-increasing number of other disciplines, is the expanding range of research tools used to investigate L2 investigation - see Mackey and Gass (2016) for an up-to-date account of second language research methods.

Etic	Emic
Observing/ assessing learners' L2 behavior	investigating learners' subjective understandings of their own L2 behavior
• Error analysis • Obligatory occasion analysis • Frequency analysis • Discourse analysis • Conversational analysis • Language testing • Psycholinguistic tests • Eye-tracking • Corpus-related research	• Diary studies • Questionnaires • Interviews • Stimulated recall • Narrative enquiry • Observation

Research participants

Groups	Individuals
Typically etic	Typically emic
Cognitive SLA	Social SLA
Cross-sectional	Longitudinal
Experimental	Descriptive and interpretative
Inferential statistics	
Effect sizes	Descriptive accounts

Data types

Three types:
1. Naturally occurring L2 use
2. Experimentally elicited L2 use (e.g. using tasks)
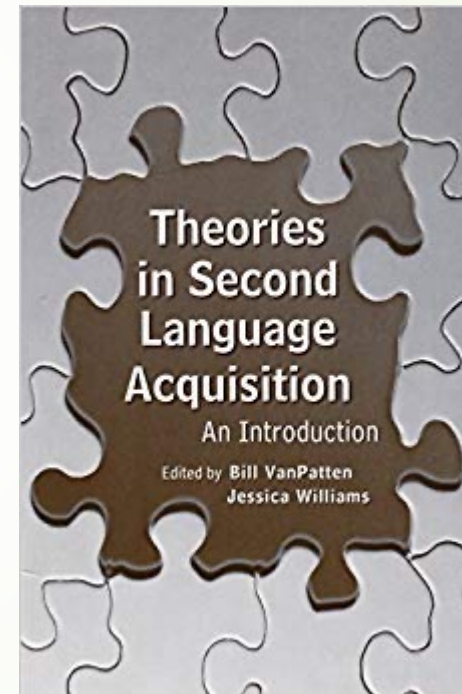3. Clinically elicited L2 use (e.g. using tests)

The key issue is the theoretical validity of the elicited samples, in particular the experimentally elicited ones.

Increasing methodological sophistication

- Willingness to subject the procedures used to collect and analyze data to critical scrutiny

- Technical expertise

- Meta-analysis

- Mixed methods

- SLA methodology a topic in its own right

Why investigate L2 acquisition?

Survey book	Purpose of SLA
Ellis (1985)	• Helping teachers construct a theory of language learning that is explicit and open to revision
Long & Larsen-Freeman (1991)	• Intellectual curiosity • Increasing teachers' awareness about the learning process • Helping populations with specific language learning needs • Informing other disciplines (e.g. by helping to investigate linguists' claims about linguistic universals).
Mitchell & Myles (1997)	• Contributing to "fundamental understandings such as the working of the human mind • Informing social practice (most obviously language teaching)
Doughty & Long (2003)	• What it can reveal about the nature of the human mind and intelligence • Contributing to linguistics and psychology
Ortega (2009)	• Understanding how do humans learn languages after they learn their first? • Addressing real-world problems such as when best to start learning a language • overcoming negative attitudes to immigrants • making instruction effective.

Four main reasons

1. It can help to guide language teaching.

2. Its contribution to social practice – for example, informing policy making about immigrant populations.

3. it can assist the development of its parent disciplines by serving as a testing ground for linguistic, cognitive and social theories.

4. Academic curiosity.

Underlying conceptualizations

There is clearly a divide between two views about SLA:

- It is a sub-branch of applied linguistics and therefore essentially problem-solving

- It is an independent discipline with ties to other academic disciplines – especially linguistics and cognitive psychology - but also separate from them.

SLA – a scientific discipline or an applied field of enquiry?

	Pure	Applied
Hard	Contextual imperatives: each new piece of knowledge has its place in the picture "Discovery" **Chemistry**	Draws on hard knowledge domain, applied to practical problems Outcomes which are often products, techniques **Civil Engineering**
Soft	Contextual associations: loosely knit clusters of ideas "Interpretations" **English**	Draws on soft pure knowledge domain to interpret and understand situations Outcomes are often protocols or procedures **Marketing**

Fragmentation of SLA

Kuhn (1962) - suggested that as a discipline matures, a paradigm emerges that sets limits on the domain of inquiry but this does not always happen and clearly not in SLA.

DeKeyser (2010) - found the bifurcation in SLA that arose with the social turn "worrisome for those such as himself who have a vested interest in SLA" because "if this trend continues, SLA will be absorbed completely into psycholinguistics or cognitive psychology, on the one hand, and anthropology or sociology, on the other hand" (p. 247).
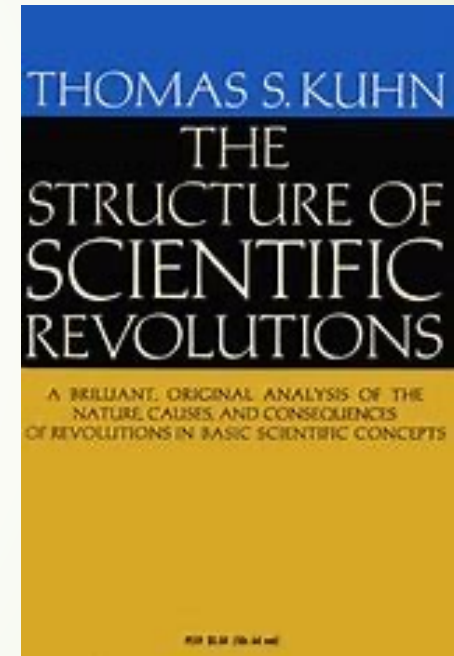
Defining characteristics of a discipline (Krishnan, 2009)

1. There is a particular object of research

2. There is an accumulated specialist knowledge referring to the object of research not generally shared with another discipline.

3. There are theories and concepts that can organize the accumulated knowledge effectively.

4. There are specific terminologies referring to the research object.

5. Specific research methods have been developed.

6. There is some institutional manifestation such as subjects taught at universities in academic departments practising the discipline.

1. Object of enquiry

The object of enquiry was self-evident - L2 acquisition - up to the social turn when the focus shifted from "acquisition" to "participation" (Sfard, 1998).

But if SLA is to constitute a coherent body of knowledge the focus must be clearly on how people LEARN an L2, not just on how they USE it in social settings.
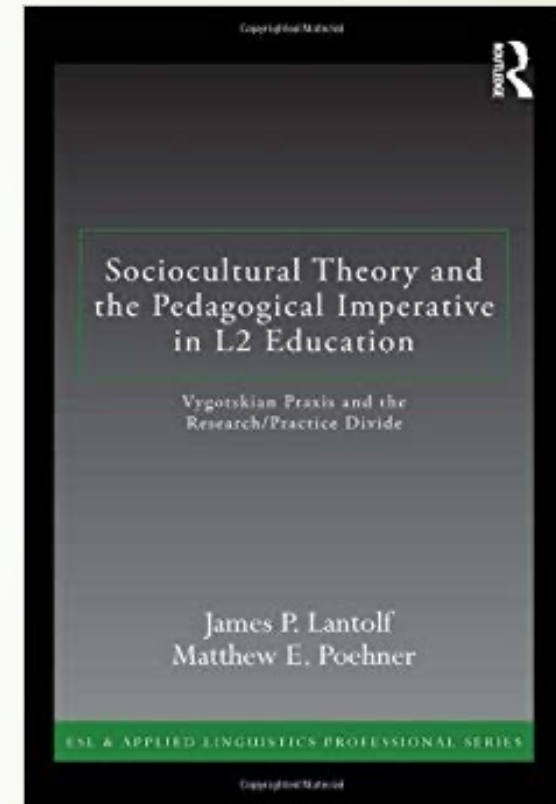
Two possibilities

1. Delimit the scope of SLA by acknowledging cognitive psychology as the "institutional choice" for SLA and the psycholinguistic processes of acquisition as the primary object of inquiry (Long & Doughty, 2003).

2. Make the link between "participation" and "learning" the object of enquiry – Sociocultural SLA; Learning-tracking methodology (Markee, 2008).

2. Specialist knowledge

SLA has always drawn on specialist knowledge from other disciplines – L1 acquisition, cognitive psychology, sociology, anthropology, education – readily borrowing constructs from them.

The claim to specialist knowledge relies less on the originality of the constructs themselves, than on how borrowed constructs are adapted and incorporated into SLA – e.g. Complex Dynamic Systems Theory.

Is there an agreed set of facts about the nature of L2 learning?

**SPECIALIST KNOWLEDGE**
GENERALIST
LANGUAGE

. Theories that effectively organize the knowledge base of SLA

No unifying theory.

'Strong' theories that have a tribal following:

- Processability Theory (Pienemann, 1998
- Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996)
- usage-based theories (e.g. N. Ellis, 2015).

However, even these strong theories are subject to criticism – not all researchers agree there are universal acquisition sequences; sociocultural theory offers a very different account of the role of interaction in learning to that of Long.
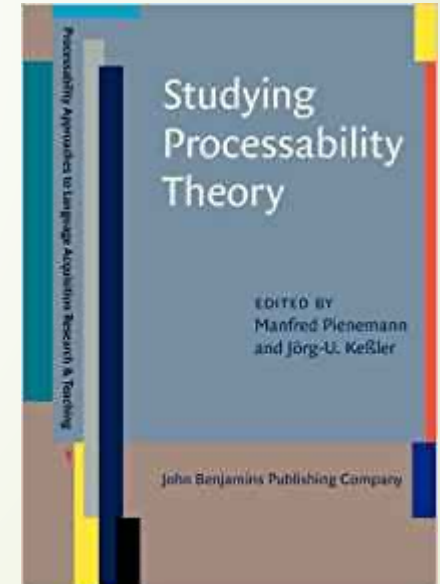
Are multiple theories a problem?

Krishnan (2009) distinguished:

- the formation stage of a discipline where multiple perspectives are inevitable and desirable

- a later stage where researchers consolidate the field and the discipline takes on stable identity that enables it to survive.

So what stage has SLA reached? I would argue that it is still in the formative period – 50 years are not long in the history of a discipline.

Two views

1. Theory culling is necessary (Long, 1993; DeKeyser, 2010).

2. Let all the flowers grow (Lantolf).

The process of fragmentation is likely to continue and distinct sub-areas – e.g. cognitive SLA, linguistic SLA, sociocultural SLA, instructed SLA - will consolidate.

If SLA is an applied rather than a pure discipline, it is difficult to see how a single unifying theory could meet diverse needs.

Complex Dynamic Systems Theory

I have my doubts about this theory.

If SLA is a 'pure' discipline, not claiming to be of value to society, a theory that eschews generalization may have a place, but if SLA is an applied discipline there is a need for generalizations that can inform applications.

The theory does not offer any practical suggestions about how to design and implement language instruction.

"We're working on some exciting aspects of chaos theory."

GOFF

4. Specific terminologies

In this respect, at least, SLA has a strong claim to be a discipline.

- Glossaries in my own survey books.
- Loewen and Reinders' (2011) *Key Concepts of Language Acquisition*

But just as there is no single disciplinary perspective in SLA so there is no clear agreement about a set of core of terms.

5. Specific research methods

SLA has not so much developed its own research methods as utilized and adapted existing tools.

Sometimes, however, the level of adaptation is so great as to warrant the claim that the methods are novel:

- Taxonomies of strategies used in the negotiation of meaning (Long, 19833; Varonis and Gass, 1985)

- Measures of complexity, accuracy and fluency used to investigate L2 production, (Housen, Kuiken, and Vedder, 2012)

- Tests of implicit and explicit L2 knowledge (Ellis, 2005).
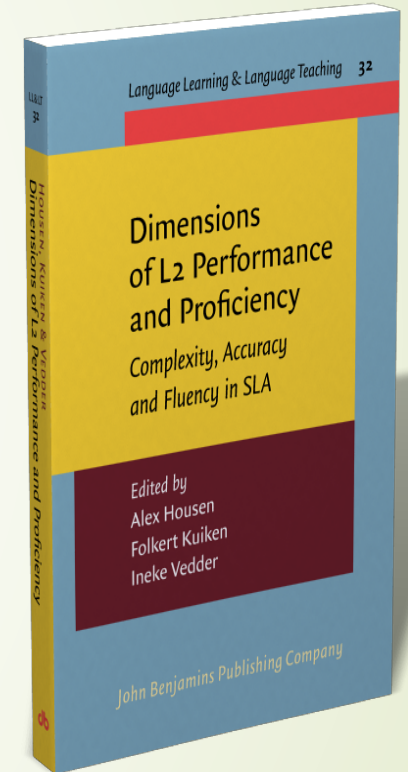
6. Institutional manifestation

Mixed picture:

- specialist SLA journals (e.g. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*) and conferences (e.g. *Second Language Research Forum*)

- few departments of SLA in universities

- SLA researchers are often very isolated and unable to form a community of practice in their work place.

- University managers recognize the interdisciplinary value of SLA in contributing to teaching and research in more established disciplines.

If SLA is a discipline, its institutional manifestation points to it being an applied rather than a pure one.
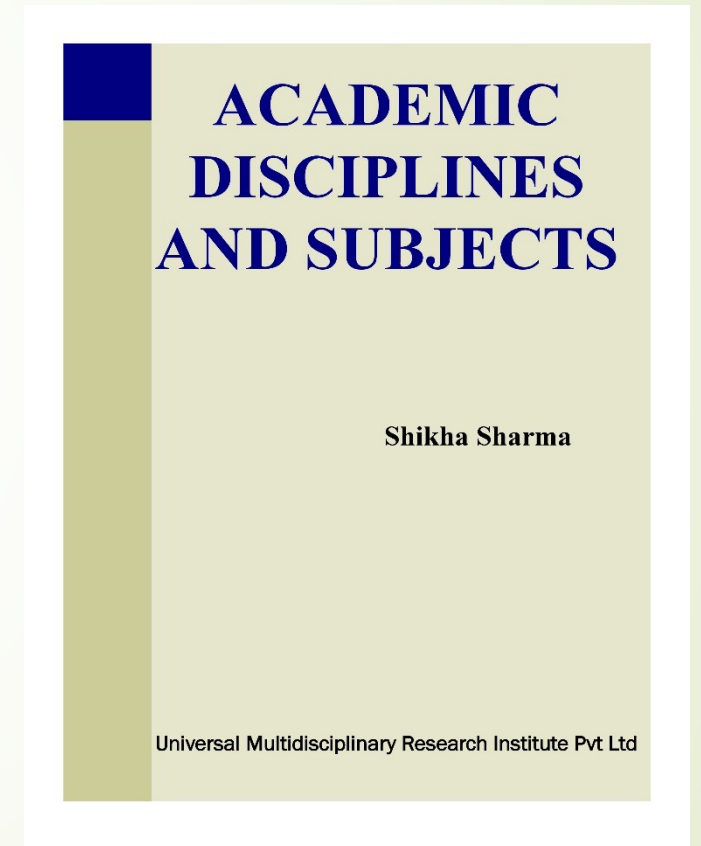
Some conclusions

The six characteristics

Krishnan acknowledged that not all disciplines manifest all six characteristics but that the more boxes a discipline ticks "the more likely it becomes that a certain field of academic enquiry is recognised as a discipline capable of reproducing itself and building upon a growing body of scholarship" (p. 10).

ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES AND SUBJECTS

Shikha Sharma

Universal Multidisciplinary Research Institute Pvt Ltd

Characteristic	Applied to SLA
1. There is a particular object of research	The object of enquiry in SLA is the acqu... second language.
2. There is an accumulated specialist knowledge referring to the object of research not generally shared with another discipline.	SLA has drawn on knowledge from diff... established disciplines and adapted th... specialized knowledge about L2 acqu...
3. There are theories and concepts that can organize the accumulated knowledge effectively.	There are multiple theories and numero... concepts used to organize and explain... accumulated knowledge but there is l... the emergence of a unifying theory or... agreement about the boundaries of th...
4. There is specific terminologies referring to the research object.	There is a wealth of specialist terminolo... agreed set of common core terms.
5. Specific research methods have been developed.	SLA has largely borrowed its research... methodologies from other disciplines b... applied them in creative ways.

Two types of disciplines (Hulstijn, 2013)

Type of discipline	Type of theory
Disciplines that address "fundamental issues" such as the existence of linguistic universals or how language has evolved in the human species.	Theories where ideas are testable in ways that allow for replication (e.g. Long's Interaction Hypothesis).
Disciplines that address issues of "an applied mainly educational nature".	Pre-scientific theories (i.e. theories that incorporate ideas that are not testable) as long as these ideas are of practical value (e.g. Krashen's Monitor Model).

My own view

If we accept that SLA is fundamentally an applied area of inquiry, diversity is no longer a problem and there will be no need for turf battles over boundaries of SLA.

I would add, though, we do need to agree that the object of enquiry is L2 learning, not just L2 use, which is the business of sociology and anthropology.