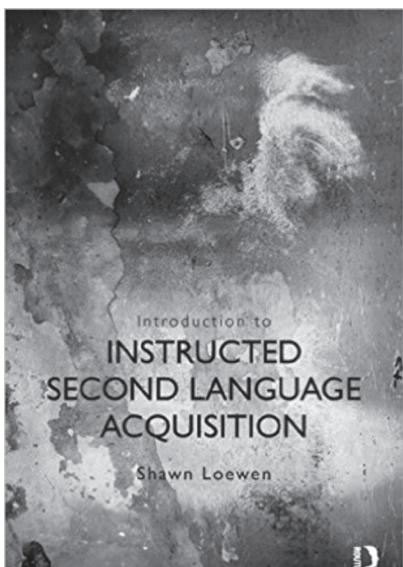


# Book Review



<b>Title</b>	Language Acquisition
<b>Author</b>	Shawn Loewen
<b>Publisher</b>	London and New York: Routledge 2015
<b>No. of pages</b>	PP x + 210 pages
<b>ISBN</b>	ISBN 978-0-415-52954-9 [paperback]
<b>Reviewer</b>	Marilyn Lewis The University of Auckland

This title will catch the eye of teachers and researchers, who may wonder what fresh insights there might be on the topic. What new questions will the book address or what new answers will there be for familiar questions? Shawn Loewen, of Michigan State University, is well placed to bring together current questions and answers in our field. With an impressive list of publications over the past decade and with a reputation as a thoughtful teacher, researcher and speaker, he has brought together a carefully organised and up-to-date book about ISLA (Instructed Second Language Acquisition).

The ten chapters reflect the author's aim of writing a book of relevance to readers in one or more of three threads: theory, research and pedagogy. Each chapter starts by defining the specific topic, then there is a summary of the chapter's theoretical issues. Research summaries follow, sometimes in meta-analyses, at other times individually. Then there are classroom applications and suggested activities for students. Finally a few readings are suggested. A more extensive reading list fills 17 pages at the end of the book, with only some of the references repeated from the ends of chapters.

The introduction reminds readers that the topic is a little more complex than the sum of its four parts, each of which is analysed. As one example of this complexity the author points out that the 'instructed' part of the acronym need not be limited to classroom learning. It could also happen during study abroad, or individuals' use of text books or computer-assisted language learning (CALL) or in any other context which is 'manipulated'. Then there is the word 'second', which needs examining in cases such as children raised in bilingual families. The third part of the acronym (language) is expanded in Chapters 4-8,

one each for the focus on form, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and pragmatics. Finally there is the term ‘acquisition’. Loewen chooses not to keep to the learning/ acquisition distinction but rather to speak of implicit/ explicit (or declarative/ procedural) knowledge.

Chapter 2 examines *The nature of second language knowledge* by looking for answers to questions about the development of communicative competence. What do we mean by knowing a second language? How do we acquire that language and how is the knowledge stored in our brains? As in all the chapters, the final activities are designed to help students reflect on answers for themselves. *Classroom interaction* is the topic of Chapter 3. One fascinating thing about illustrating language functions with specific examples is that such illustrations will always be a step behind current usage. Shortly before reading that functionally “Do you know what I mean?” acts as a comprehension check I had been listening to a radio programme in which the interviewee used those very words at the end of every second sentence almost in the role of a punctuation mark. Does that count as a comprehension check?

Then come the chapters which focus on specific aspects of ISLA. It is difficult in a review to do justice to the depth of treatment of aspect, but a few highlights will illustrate the book’s focus. *Focus on form* in Chapter 4 includes a graphic summary (one of several throughout the book) which is a useful reminder of the relationship between the parts of the whole topic, in this case between instruction, meaning and form. In one of the final activities students can compare two views on “the effectiveness of focus on form and task-based interaction” (p. 75) and then provide their own evidence. Chapter 5 is *The acquisition of grammar*. Teachers (and text book writers) who have original ideas on a good order for learning language items can note that the stages in which items are acquired cannot be altered, although “instruction may help learners progress through the stages more quickly” (p. 79). Here and elsewhere we notice one feature of Loewen’s writing, which is to avoid absolute conclusions, preferring to report that “many ... researchers no longer believe” (p. 80) or “the effects of more explicit types of grammar instruction are mixed” (p. 92).

Various issues related to *The acquisition of vocabulary* are addressed in Chapter 6, including depth/breadth of knowledge and receptive/productive knowledge. Text book writers and teachers are encouraged to be principled rather than random in their choice of items and to make sure that new words are met many times. In Chapter 7 the topic is *The acquisition of pronunciation* which, we are told, has had less attention from ISLA researchers than has acquiring grammar and vocabulary. Particularly interesting is the discussion of the often debated goal of reaching near-native proficiency in this area. More relevant perhaps is the question of which aspects of pronunciation are most fundamental to being understood. Also, do some learners resist some aspects of pronunciation in the interest of retaining their original identity?

*The acquisition of pragmatics* (“the way that individuals use language in social contexts” P. 129) is dealt with in Chapter 8. Amongst other observations, the author notes that pragmatic comprehension has had less attention than has production. Is this because in learning their own language children are likely to have had so much feedback on their polite use of language? As in other chapters, the final activities give students a chance to try out their own pragmatic language use in a couple of role plays. In Chapter 9, *Contexts of instructed second language acquisition*, Loewen looks at less traditional settings, including immersion, study abroad and CALL. As one interesting detail, it probably won’t surprise host families and others to read that study abroad does not automatically provide ideal conditions for language learning.

Finally Chapter 10 addresses *Individual differences and instructed second language acquisition*. A table bringing together what has already been said about individual differences is a helpful starting point. Details are then expanded. For instance, Loewen points out that the question of aptitude was not high on researchers’ radar for some time but is now receiving more attention, with an emphasis on separate elements of aptitude such as phonemic coding, grammatical sensitivity and memory.

As a former colleague of Loewen’s in the early stages of his career, it comes as no surprise to me that he has produced such a readable and comprehensive volume. With its detailed, ten-page index and the practical activities already mentioned, it is easy to imagine that it will become a well-used course text for university students such as those for whom its contents were first developed.

**Reviewer:**

**Marilyn Lewis** was an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Auckland. Her interest in TESL continues through her writing and through running teacher workshops in various Asian countries. In New Zealand she supports English Language Partners, an organization that provides English language support for refugees and other immigrants.