LANGUAGE LEARNING: TRENDS IN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

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Abstract*: If we view researchers' work as responding to classroom concerns rather than applying their findings directly to the students, then researchers can have a great deal to say to teachers. As teaching a foreign language is an interactive process, learners must have opportunities to produce comprehensible output during interrelation involving meaningful contents. The effectiveness of grammar instruction appears to depend largely on selection and sequencing of grammar rules. Foreign-language students provide at the moment the best research site for finding answers to this crucial area of language learning.*

Key words*: foreign-language input, grammar instructions, correction, cultural integration, research emphasis*

Both language teachers and researchers may share a number of concerns regarding the work they do. These common concerns are often overlooked because the enormity of their task as language teacher and researcher constrains the commitment to fulfilling these roles at the same time. Even when they seem to balance their roles as language teachers and researchers, they find themselves in the position of being more of one and less of the other.

As teachers, we might find ourselves analyzing our practice and our students' progress as part of the process of planning classroom activities or reorganizing course content. As researchers, we usually teach, but often do so through courses in applied linguistics or literature than language. Occasionally researchers, themselves as experienced language teachers, have kept diaries to look introspectively at the trials and frustrations of their own classroom language learning and their relationship with the teacher.

This interchanging of roles of the teacher and researcher is found with regard to the focus of research: Researchers have generally preferred to study the learner rather than the teacher and have seldom examined both learning and teaching at the same time. As a result, we have volumes of data analysis on learners' linguistic productions and misproductions and on features of the social and linguistic environments available to them, these mostly second language learning contexts. Researchers' concerns are shared first of all within the research community, and applied, not to classroom decisions, but to the interpretation of previous investigations. This is not to suggest that language researchers have little interest in teaching practice. As a matter of fact, many of them were teachers at one time. In spite of their teaching backgrounds, however, researchers have felt

reluctant to take their findings about language learning and apply them directly to the students.

There are very good reasons for this reluctance. The generalizability of language-learning research to the classroom has been greatly limited by its focus and context. Much of this research, especially that which has been used to generate and support theoretical claims about the learning process, has been restricted to foreign language learners and their interlocutors, speaking outside the classroom and outside the roles of student and teacher. Most of the data used to ground current theories of language acquisition are skewed toward adult language learners in second-language environments. Consequently, this research cannot be applied to the instruction of foreign-language learners in particular or to teaching decisions in general.

It is only recently that classroom input has come under study. Researchers have found features of the foreign language available to learners in the classroom to be quite different in structure, complexity, and content compared to foreign language input addressed to learners engaged in conversations and interviews with native speakers. There is not much basis for application of overall findings on input to what goes on in classrooms, especially if the classroom is to be the learner's only source of input, as in the case in foreign-language study.

Finally, individual learners come to their social communities with their own constellation of native language and culture, proficiency level, learning style, motivation, and attitudes toward language learning. Individual teachers have their own distinctive styles, and use many different materials and teaching techniques in the course of a single classroom session, countless others in a given week or semester. In attempting to maintain standards of internal consistency, most researchers have investigated only one feature of language learning at a time – for example, learning style or native-language transfer – and have worked hard to control for all others. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that the impact of any one feature of language learning, when studied in isolation, will be the same when made available in the classroom.This is another reason why so many researchers warn that their results should not be applied directly when making classroom decisions.

How does knowing one language help and hinder the learning of a second? Researchers have responded to this question in a variety of ways. Much of the early work in applied linguistics focused on forms and features of the languages learned in classrooms rather than on classroom learners themselves. It was believed that native language could predict difficulty in foreign-language learning and that therefore the work of the researcher was to compare the native language of the learner with the language the learner wanted to acquire. Many researchers made inventories of the sounds, words, and structures of students' first and foreign languages and suggested teaching decisions in accordance with similarities and differences presented in these inventories.

In his *The Natural Approach,* Krashen (1983) makes a distinction between foreign language input to learners and their actual linguistic intake. He argues that second- or foreign-language input must be comprehended as intake in order to assist the acquisition process. Not all researchers who have studied learners in classrooms agree with Krashen's ideas about the sufficiency of comprehension to successful language acquisition. However, the overall consensus among researchers is that the learner's linguistic environment is a major contributor to the acquisition process. They have asked how input within the learner's environment can be made comprehensible and have organized their research to respond to this question.

It seems that input is made comprehensible through modified and negotiated *interaction* in which learners seek clarification, confirmation, and repetition of the foreign language utterances they do not understand.Through these interactional modifications, linguistic adjustments such as repetitions and rephrasing are provided to aid the comprehensibility of unclear input. Research has shown that if such adjustments are made a priori to text or lecture input, they aid the learner's comprehension.

Teaching a foreign language should be an interactive process between teachers and students and among the students themselves. Students need to comprehend the new language, but can best do this when allowed to ask about what it is that they do not understand rather than rely on their teacher or textbook to anticipate areas of comprehension difficulty and simplify a priori. What these results also suggest is that simply giving students enough wait time to ask questions about or to internalize input that they do not initially understand may have very good results on their comprehension, without the need for the teacher's help.

In order to encourage participation among students who seldom ask questions or initiate interaction there must be a need for research comparing interactive vs. non-interactive classroom learners. However, research results of relevance to teachers are mixed and often contradictory. Learners who initiated and participated in interactions that required using English as a foreign language in and out of the classroom made more rapid progress and fewer errors than learners who interacted little. On the other hand, the student who made the most progress in the foreign language development was one who initiated and engaged in less interaction than the most interactive student in the class. This finding suggested that quieter learners might benefit from the input supplied by their more interactive classmates. As long as the students were at an intermediate level of second language proficiency, they could comprehend the input of teacher both by interacting directly and by simply observing interaction among them. However, for less proficient learners in the same classrooms, interaction in the form of opportunities to seek clarification of message content was essential to their comprehension.

As regards these competing findings on the need for learners to interact in order to comprehend a second language , it is important for us to keep in mind that individual learners have their own ways of drawing input for comprehension. Language classroom research needs to probe more deeply into the differential ways that learners find success in their language learning. This is why it is too soon for teachers to turn to the results of a handful of studies on the effects of interaction when making classroom decisions in this field.

Given recent emphasis on classroom interaction and group work, much recent literature on language-teaching methods as well as textbooks for learners have tended to upgrade the importance of activities for meaningful use of the new language and downgrade the contribution made by exercises that emphasize the practice of grammar rules. In addition, through what might be considered this "strong" version of communicative language teaching, learners are assumed to be able to infer the grammar rules of a new language by means of large quantities of meaningful and comprehensible input and abundant opportunities for the foreign language social interaction. The overall amount of input and interaction targeted to individual learners will be reduced in relation to the total number of learners in the classroom. This situation suggests that learners may need a more efficient means to access the grammar rules of the language they are trying to learn than through listening or reading experiences.

Once teachers make a decision toward incorporating explicit grammar instruction in the classroom or strengthen their resolve to teach grammar to their students, the question remains as to selection and sequencing of grammar rules so that they can be acquired effectively. There are many studies focused on this topic that reveal a few guiding principles for selection and sequencing decisions based on factors of learnability, linguistic complexity, and learner-readiness. For instance, the range of relative-clause constructions in English could be learnt faster if instruction begins with the most difficult type of relative clause (object of preposition) rather than the easiest (subject).

Another positive aspect of explicit grammar instruction was found for items that are "easy to learn", i.e., have a straightforward form-function relationship, but are difficult to hear in input. If we compare learners of English as a foreign language with learners of English as a second language who have never had formal instruction, we may find that instruction appears to influence production of some structures, such as the rule for plural *–s*, but has little effect on others, such as the more difficult rules for articles *a* and *the*.

Given their findings, how might researchers respond to teachers' questions about whether or not explicit grammar instruction is necessary for their students? The effectiveness of grammar instruction seems to depend largely on selection and sequencing of grammar rules and careful assessment of learner readiness. Some items are better off not taught, while the learning of others is enhanced, indeed accelerated, through instruction. Research on grammar instruction has thus begun to explain why learners often do not learn what teachers teach and yet master other

forms and features quite effectively. So far, some basic principles have been advanced regarding rule selection and sequencing for grammar instruction. There remains an enormous amount of research to be done, however, within individual languages and across different grammatical structures and rules.

Under the influence of the communicative approach to language teaching, drill and practice in the classroom have waned recently. The enthusiasm about the contributions of drill and practice to language learning generated by current research needs to be tempered by the contributions that have been associated with comprehensible input in successful language learning. Teachers also need to know whether comprehensible input is all that is necessary for successful foreign-language acquisition and, if not, how drill, practice, and other opportunities for learner production can enhance the learning process. Researchers found that the goal of comprehensible output for learners was somewhat impractical. Beginning learners had limited opportunities to modify their output because when they had difficulty making their interlanguage comprehensible, their interlocutors tended to model correct versions of their interlanguage productions for them.

When teachers were excluded from the native-speaker interlocutor selection process, it was found that learners' modification of their foreign language output was much more prevalent, but that this was related to the nature of the task on which they worked with the interlocutor, the nature of the request made by the interlocutor, and the learner-interlocutor gender pairing, such that female native speakers invited more foreign language output modification from the learners than did male native speakers.

These results have a great deal to say to language teachers, given typical language classroom conditions: use of activities in which it is the teacher rather than the learner who holds all the information needed for the activity, teachers' practice of modelling correct versions of student responses rather than giving them time to reformulate and try again, and the current professional climate whereby female instructors predominate in language classrooms. Learners must have opportunities to produce comprehensible output during interaction involving meaningful content. Such opportunities allow them to modify inter-language toward greater clarity, to make hypotheses about the foreign language, and to try to map foreign language form onto meaning. Drill and practice of isolated grammatical structures does not seem sufficient in scope for helping learners reach this goal. What research has shown is that indeed no one practice – from structure drill to open-ended conversation – operates in isolation to help or inhibit language learning.

One assumption about the language-learning process is that errors indicate learner hypotheses about the target language and that overt correction cannot alter learners' natural path of acquisition. Recent theories argue against the belief that learners' incorrect hypotheses should go uncorrected. These theories claim that that explicit and /or implicit correction is essential to a theory that includes hypothesis testing as part of the foreign language acquisition process. What has been advanced

about the role of correction in the learning process appears not only confusing in itself, but also to contradict the claim that comprehensible input is all that is needed for successful foreign language acquisition. Much of the confusion and contradiction is based on the fact that so little is known about the nature of correction and its effect on the learning process. A controlled approach to such research is difficult to carry out in the second language settings that have dominated language-learning research.

"How necessary to learning a language is cultural integration?" is a question that troubles foreign-language teachers, as they work with students in classrooms far removed from the culture of the language they are learning. In some respects, second-language environments pose problems for cultural integration as well. Just because a learner lives in a country where the language under study is spoken widely in the community does not guarantee opportunities for integration with its users. And even when there are opportunities for integration, language learning is not always guaranteed. In an interesting research project, Barbara Freed (1991) has examined the long term effects of cultural contact after students return from a study-abroad program. The study reveals the extent to which exposure to speakers in the actual culture of the studied language affects proficiency and the learning process itself. Attempting to separate the contributions of cultural integration from other factors is difficult to do in a second-language context, where learners are exposed to a variety of cultural experiences at the same time they are engaged in formal language study. Research on study-abroad programs, in which there is a clear sequencing of target community and classroom contents, may perhaps provide the most revealing answers to questions regarding the need for cultural integration in successful language learning.The language teacher should know that achieving native-like pronunciation is a complex process, largely related to factors beyond the learner's and teacher's control. Yet accurate pronunciation is often viewed as a primary goal in the classroom. A high premium is often placed on accurate pronunciation both as a measure of students' progress and an indicator of proficiency in a language.

Many claims have been made as to why many learners do not come to master the rules and features of another language. Second-language researchers have argued that limitation of opportunities for integration with a target culture outside the classroom is what brings about the phenomenon of "fossilization". Some researchers have advanced learner-internal explanations for fossilization. For instance, they report that fossilized learners who are communicatively functional in the second language do not appear "to notice the gap" between their interlanguage and the standard second language target. Unlike learners still capable of developing a second language, fossilized learners may be unable to modify their interlanguage toward accuracy even when supplied with models for them to imitate and to guide their production.

Researchers suggest that fossilized learners do not benefit from interlocutor confirmation checks and clarification requests in revising non-target-

like grammatical features. This would indicate a need for more grammar-based classroom materials. Instruction should proceed from the fossilized learner's strength areas in spoken communication to reading and writing tasks and from contextualized materials and communicative techniques to decontextualized, grammar-oriented instruction. Responding to the needs of fossilized learners and of the teachers who work with them seems to depend on finding appropriate materials and procedures and monitoring their impact through careful study.

Oftentimes, our tasks as teachers and researchers can seem overwhelming, but we continue to rise to the challenges of our professional roles and welcome new challenges that confront us in our work with language learners. English has grown from a native, second, or foreign language to become an international language of business, science, and technology, spoken among more non-natives than natives in the process of their professional pursuits or everyday lives.This will affect the kinds of learners we will look at in our research. Further, the need for individuals to learn uncommonly taught languages not widely available through classroom courses poses additional challenges for the informed selection of materials and procedures.

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