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Moeller, Aleidine Kramer and Catalano, Theresa, "Foreign Language Teaching and Learning" (2015). *Faculty Publications: Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education*. 196.

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Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

Foreign language teaching and learning have changed from teacher-centered to learner/learning-centered environments. Relying on language theories, research findings, and experiences, educators developed teaching strategies and learning environments that engaged learners in interactive communicative language tasks. A shift in foreign language pedagogy from a specific foreign language method to the measurement of language performance/competency has resulted in a change in the role of the teacher from one of authority/expert to that of facilitator/guide and agent of change. Current developments point to public pedagogy, social media, and action research as additional ways to foster intercultural competence and language learning.

Foreign language learning and teaching refer to the teaching or learning of a nonnative language outside of the environment where it is commonly spoken. A distinction is often made between 'foreign' and 'second' language learning. A second language implies that the learner resides in an environment where the acquired language is spoken. In the area of research, the term second language acquisition (SLA) is a general term that embraces foreign language learning and investigates the human capacity to learn languages other than the first language once it has been acquired. Scholarly inquiry into the acquisition of a nonnative language includes the disciplines of psychology, linguistics, language pedagogy, education, neurobiology, sociology, and anthropology. Inquiries of learning and teaching innovations have provided new insights into successful language learning strategies and environments designed to increase language achievement and proficiency.

Definition

A language is considered foreign if it is learned largely in the classroom and is not spoken in the society where the teaching occurs. Study of another language allows the individual to communicate effectively and creatively and to participate in real-life situations through the language of the authentic culture itself. Learning another language provides access into a perspective other than one's own, increases the ability to see connections across content areas, and promotes an interdisciplinary perspective while gaining intercultural understandings. Language is the vehicle required for effective human-to-human interactions and yields a better understanding of one's own language and culture. Studying a language provides the learner with the opportunity to gain linguistic and social knowledge and to know when, how, and why to say what to whom National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project (NSFLEP) (2014). Language scholars distinguish between the terms acquisition and learning: 'acquisition' refers to the process of learning first and second languages naturally, without formal instruction, whereas 'learning' is reserved for the formal study of second or foreign languages in classroom settings. One usually distinguishes between the rel-

atively effortless process of SLA by children and the more formal and difficult SLA by adults. Foreign language education refers to the teaching of a modern language that is neither an official language nor the mother tongue of a significant part of the population.

Theories of Language Learning

Foreign language learning and teaching have undergone a significant paradigm shift as a result of the research and experiences that have expanded the scientific and theoretical knowledge base on how students learn and acquire a foreign language. Traditionally, learning a foreign language was thought to be a 'mimetic' activity, a process that involved students repeating or imitating new information. Grounded in behaviorist theories of learning and structural linguistics, the quality and quantity of language and feedback were regarded as the major determinants of language learning success. A popular method of teaching in the 1950s, called the audio-lingual approach (ALM), promoted an imitation and practice approach to language development. The major figure in the ALM classroom was the instructor who was cast into the role of drill sergeant, expert, and authority figure. Students were relegated to practicing and imitating patterns to a point of automatic response in the belief that the learner would then merely have to slot in lexical items appropriate to the conversational situation. It was believed that the first language interfered with the acquisition of the second language and that a transfer would take place from the first to the second language, resulting in errors. In 1959, Noam Chomsky's review (Chomsky, 1959) of B.F. Skinner's (1957) *Verbal Behavior* dramatically changed the way of looking at language by arguing that language was a rule-governed activity, not a set of habits. Chomsky argued that stimulus-response psychology could not adequately account for creativity involved in generating novel utterances using internalized rules. The creative aspect of language behavior implies that the human mind is involved in deep processing of meaning rather than in memorized responses to environmental stimuli. Chomsky's view of language and cognitive psychology, dubbed generative trans-

formational grammar, regarded language acquisition as an internal thinking-learning process. Chomsky claimed that children are biologically programmed for language and have an innate ability to discover for themselves the underlying rules of a language system. Chomsky's ideas led to the demise of structural linguistics, behaviorist psychology, and the ALM approach to language learning.

An alternative theoretical position emerged centered on the role of the linguistic environment in combination with the child's innate capacities in acquiring language. This position (interactionist) viewed language development as the result of a complex interplay between innate language capacities of the learner and the learner's environment. Unlike the innatist position (e.g., Chomsky, 1959), the interactionists claimed that language had to be modified to the ability of the learner. According to Long (1985), language input was made comprehensible by simplifying the input, by using linguistic and extralinguistic cues, and by modifying the interactional structure of the conversation. Long maintained that speakers adjust their language as they interact or negotiate meaning with others. Through negotiation of meaning, interactions are changed and redirected, leading to enhanced comprehensibility. Long proposed that learners, in order to acquire language, cannot simply listen to input, rather they must be active co-constructive participants who interact and negotiate the type of input they receive.

Each of these theories of language acquisition addresses a different aspect of a learner's ability to acquire a language. Behaviorist explanations explain systematic aspects, whereas innatist explanations explain the acquisition of complex grammar. Interactionist explanations assist in understanding how learners relate form and meaning in language, how they interact in conversation, and how they use language appropriately.

More recently, researchers have identified nine contemporary language learning theories: Universal Grammar, Autonomous Induction, Associative-Cognitive CREED, Skill Acquisition, Input Processing, Processability, Concept-Oriented Approach, Interaction Framework, and Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory (VanPatten and Williams, 2008). Some of these theories share a linguistic view of language cognition, others view it from a psychological point of view and in the case of Sociocultural Theory, a social approach is taken. The Universal Grammar (UG) and Autonomous Induction theory share the linguistic view that learners have innate knowledge of grammatical structures that is not learned through mere exposure to input. They believe that linguistic knowledge is predetermined and is independent from experience. Learning is believed to occur incidentally by deduction from innate abstract knowledge.

The psychological view of language cognition is represented by the following theories: Associative-Cognitive CREED, Skill Acquisition theory, Input Process theory, Processability theory, Concept-Oriented Approach, and the Interaction Framework. While these approaches share a psychological view of cognition, there are some distinct differences. The Associative-Cognitive CREED, Input Processing, Processability, and Concept-Oriented theories view language acquisition as implicit and language learning is presented as an incidental and a subconscious learning process. However, according to the Skill Acquisition theory there is a conscious processing

in language acquisition that requires explicit instruction in order for deliberate learning to occur.

The most prevalent and most widely held theory, the Sociocultural Theory (SCT) proposed by Vygotsky, views cognition as a social faculty. According to this theory, participation in culturally organized activities is essential for learning to occur. Active engagement in social dialogue is important. Learning is regarded as intentional, goal-directed, and meaningful and is not a passive or incidental process but is always conscious and intentional. According to Ellis and Larsen-Freeman (2006) learning from exposure comes about "as part of a communicatively rich human social environment" (p. 577). This is discussed in more detail later in this article.

Emphases in Second Language Research and Teaching

Research has revealed that knowledge of language structures demonstrated on discrete-point tests does not ensure communicative ability when the measure of language knowledge is one of more spontaneous language use. Further studies have shown that there is little correlation between the rules learners are taught and their developing knowledge of the second language. Language scholars have demonstrated that certain aspects of second language learning cannot be altered through instruction, and that intermediate, nonnative-like second language competencies, known as stages of interlanguage, characterize the progression of SLA. Selinker (1974) viewed interlanguage as an intermediate system located on a continuum stretching from the native language to the target language. Corder (1978) stated that, in the interlanguage process, the learner constantly and progressively adjusts the native language system to approximate the target language system more closely (restructuring continuum). Corder noted that not all learners showed evidence of transfer from native language to target language and suggested that there was a uniformity about the way second language learners progress and that they follow approximately the same sequence of development regardless of their native language (developmental continuum). More recent studies in the area of interlanguage such as Vidaković's study of Serbian learners of English support Corder's findings that not only is a learner's interlanguage a continuing developmental process, but that it is also systematic in its development. However, new findings contain evidence that the acquisition paths of the two linguistic systems of the learner are influenced by a rich interplay of mostly universal (as opposed to language-specific) factors and show similarities unrelated to the first or second language (2010). According to this view of SLA, the controlling factor is the innate ability for learning language that all human beings possess. Pica (1983) determined that all language learners progressed through a fixed series of stages, known as developmental sequences, in learning particular linguistic subsystems, such as word order, negation, or relative clauses. In English negation, for example, when communicative samples were examined, it was revealed that both foreign language and second language learners progressed through the same fourstage sequence, defined in terms of placement of negation. Ellis (1986) reviewed several studies that involved Japanese, Spanish, German, and Norwegian children, adolescents, and adult learners. He concluded that all English-as-a-second language learn-

ers pass through the following prescribed set of stages: (1) 'no' phrase, for example, 'No drink'; (2) negator moves inside the phrase, for example, 'I no can swim'; (3) negator is attached to modals, for example, 'I can't play this one'; and (4) auxiliary system is developed and learner acquires correct use of not and contractions, for example, 'He doesn't know anything.' This suggests that learners make particular kinds of errors at particular stages in the acquisition of a structure. Each stage marks some kind of restructuring in the mind of the learner regarding that particular structure. Structure evolves over time.

Is L2 learning possible without rules? In the absence of rules, low-level associative learning that draws on information driven processes supported by memory is possible but does not lead to knowledge of a systematic rule. Future research should investigate whether all aspects of a second language are equally learnable by implicit means or whether more complex aspects of the second language may require more conceptually driven processing in order for associations to be formed (Ellis, 2002).

Recent trends in foreign language research have increasingly focused on multilingualism and the interplay of multiple linguistic systems in the language learner. One area of multilingualism that has been much examined is cross-linguistic influence (also known as language transfer, linguistic interference, the role of the mother tongue, native language influence, and language mixing) (Odlin, 2003). Studies point to the complexity and dynamic nature of the multilingual system and have identified a number of factors involved in cross-linguistic influence in the acquisition of a foreign language, particularly of a third language. Some of these factors include (psycho) typological distance (e.g., the similarity of the languages or perceived similarity), foreign language effect (a coping strategy used as a type of 'foreign language cognitive mode'), proficiency level, and recency of use or context of the interaction. Studies also provide evidence for stronger language transfer between L2 and L3 rather than L3 and L1 (De Angelis, 2007; Wrembel, 2010). Moreover, current studies of cross-linguistic influence tend to treat each aspect of language acquisition separately (e.g., phonological transfer and transfer of literacy skills) and reveal that not each type of transfer works in exactly the same way or is influenced by the same factors.

Learner-Centered Instruction

Two communicative approaches, the input model and the input interaction model, represent two models of foreign language theory and teaching that investigate the language acquisition process from the perspective of the learner. Krashen (1982) is the principal advocate of the input model of foreign language teaching. His theory is grounded in (1) Chomsky's generative linguistics; (2) research on the effectiveness of different second/foreign teaching methods; and (3) research on affective factors (such as motivation, anxiety, and personality). Krashen posited that SLA occurs when the learner comprehends the language input in a low-anxiety, high-motivation situation, and proposed that the teacher's role is to create such a learning environment. Krashen further claimed that conscious grammar teaching/learning is effective only in a monitoring capacity to check for grammatical accuracy, not in the acquisition of the second language itself.

Because classrooms remained a major setting for language learning, the pursuit to determine those elements that enhanced classroom language achievement became particularly important. Why do two learners who seemingly have the same instructional opportunity achieve varying levels of language proficiency? Investigations focused on individual skills or abilities and environmental factors that may impact foreign language achievement and proficiency.

Individual cognitive (e.g., intelligence, aptitude, or ability) and affective (e.g., attitude and personality variables) factors were analyzed. Skehan (1986) noted a fairly strong relationship between cognitive variables such as aptitude, intelligence, and language achievement for learners in foreign language classrooms. Other factors analyzed include the age of the learner. Researchers have typically aimed at understanding how early versus late learning affects successful acquisition, and discussed this issue in terms of a critical period of acquisition in which language acquisition seemed to depend on appropriate input during this time frame (Hernandez and Ping, 2007). Although critical period effects in L2 learning are still being debated, researchers generally agree that early learning of L2 is associated with higher ultimate proficiency, and age of acquisition is reliably the strongest predictor of ultimate attainment in the language (Birdsong, 2006). Recent developments in the fields of neurolinguistics and neurobiology provide evidence that L2 grammatical processing is carried out through the same brain computational devices as those in L1. Furthermore, proficiency, age of acquisition, and amount of exposure to the L2 has been found to interact in complex ways with the different types of language performance (Perani and Abutalebi, 2005). Interestingly, not only is this true for L2 acquisition but also brain imaging research in neurobiology has revealed a general tendency that early learning (of any type) leads to dedicated neural circuitry that affects the form of cognitive and neural structures at later stages of development (Hernandez and Ping, 2007: p. 646). Moreover, studies have suggested that the attainment of broad native-likeness among late L2 learners is in fact possible (Marinova-Todd, 2003; Hernandez and Ping, 2007; Perani and Abutalebi, 2005). Future research in L2 acquisition must account not only for the typical decline in L2 attainment with age but also for the native-like achievement levels of which some late learners are capable (Birdsong, 2006: p. 37).

The predictive power of the above-mentioned traits, however, has been shown to decrease as the criteria for language proficiency became more communicative and the learning setting became more natural (versus formal and instructional). The most avid pursuit in research occurred in investigations of the role of motivation in learning language and the learner's attitude toward the target language and culture. Using Gardner and Lambert's (1972) differentiation between integrative and instrumental motivation, researchers reported no significant advantage for an integrative (intrinsic) motive and others reported an advantage when the learner was driven by instrumental (extrinsic) motives. Integrative motivation was defined as one in which the target language was being learned by an individual in order to be accepted by the native speaker community. Instrumental motivation was one in which the language was being learned for external benefits, such as securing a better job.

Results of studies investigating environmental factors reported on the effect on achievement scores. Carroll (1975) conducted a survey of French instruction in eight countries and noted effects on achievement by gender, school type, and teacher gender, and mixed effects according to parental interest. Social factors outside the school were determined to have a significant impact on the development of language proficiency. Both cognitive and affective factors were investigated to explain the variance in foreign language achievement. Motivation, attitudes, anxiety, self-esteem, tolerance of ambiguity, risk-taking, cooperation, and competition proved to be key variables that explained individual differences in foreign language learning (Ellis, 1994). Successful language learning was determined to be largely dependent on who was learning the language, under what circumstances, and for what purposes. Foreign language acquisition was revealed to be a complex, multidimensional process influenced by both learner and environment variables. The questions generated by these theories and research studies began to focus on significant new responsibilities on the part of the teacher in the design and support of individual and personalized learning tasks.

Learning and Measurement

Language teaching has experienced numerous curricular innovations in response to the importance of providing students with opportunities to acquire and practice the foreign language in contextualized and meaningful language communicative tasks at all stages of the second or foreign language acquisition process. Communicative language teaching (CLT), the term most associated with current discussion of method, emerged as a significant approach that found universal resonance and support in theory and application in many contexts and across disciplines (linguists, methodologists, and curriculum developers). Central to the rise of CLT was the realization that linguistic competence does not on its own achieve communicative competence (Canale and Swain, 1980) and that language used in meaningful, authentic contexts is more readily acquired.

Pair work, group work, cooperative/collaborative learning settings, authentic materials, culturally integrated lesson content, and interactive tasks focused on the cognitive and affective domains were integrated into foreign language classrooms. In addition, there has been a call for the reconceptualization of theoretical underpinnings related to use of the target language for language instruction.

Past instructional policies have been dominated by monolingual instructional principles largely unsupported by empirical evidence. In today's multilingual classrooms there is a need to revisit the common assumptions that translation from L2 to L1 (or L3 to L2 for that matter) has no place in the teaching of language or literacy, that instruction should be carried out exclusively in the target language without recourse to students' L1, and that L1 and L2 should be kept rigidly separate (Cummins, 2010). In contrast to these assumptions, recent research has shed light on the fact that the L1 should be seen as a cognitive and linguistic resource that can function as a stepping stone to support more effective performance in the L2 (p. 238).

Furthermore, constructivist teaching practices, influenced by Vygotsky's emphasis on social interaction in learning and development, helped learners to internalize and reshape new

information. The theoretical underpinnings of Vygotsky's (1978) view of language learning that maintained contextualized input in cooperative, meaningful interactions with others formed a basis for Sociocultural Theory (SCT), which has enhanced language acquisition and taken hold in classrooms around the globe. According to Lantolf and Pavlenko (1995), the goal of SCT is to understand how people organize and use their mind in the daily process of living. From a sociocultural stance, acquiring language amounts to more than just mastery of the linguistic properties of the L2. It involves the "dialectic interaction of two ways of creating meaning in the world" (p. 110). The interaction between an expert (teacher) and novice (learner) in a problem-solving task (scaffolding) in which the expert's role was to provide the novice with instructional support then became the model for communicative tasks in the foreign language classrooms. Based on Vygotsky's concept of a Zone of Proximal Development (the distance between the actual developmental level and the level of potential development), the expert's and teacher's role was to gain the learner's interest in the task, simplify the task, keep the learner motivated, point out important features, reduce anxiety and frustration during problem solving, and model appropriate form. In accordance with the new responsibilities, the role of the classroom teacher shifted to that of an architect, creating meaningful, interactive, and cooperative learning tasks designed to engage the learner actively in negotiating language meaning in authentic contexts that are co-constructed.

The focus on student language proficiency as measured through performance-based tasks made itself felt both in language learning research and in teaching. Questions emerged regarding how language proficiency could be enhanced and how best to measure the level of language proficiency.

As the proficiency movement has gained momentum in the US and most recently in Europe, consensus was sought about describing and measuring language abilities. The development of the Proficiency Guidelines by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) defined what language users are able to do with language in speaking, listening, reading, and writing at various levels of performance. These Guidelines marked a major shift in language pedagogy from methodology to measurement and a focus on learner outcomes. In 1996, content standards were published and subsequently revised (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996, 2006, 2014) that delineated what learners should know and be able to do with language. The ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners (ACTFL, 2006) described language performance within three modes of communication (interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational) to assist teachers in understanding how well students demonstrate language ability at various points along the language-learning continuum. A similar effort by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement's Language Education Study is seeking a comparison and evaluation of the outcomes of different educational systems across Europe. The Standards Movement, seeking to promote the establishment of guidelines for the teaching of foreign languages for all learners, indicates the growing concern with learner outcomes and accountability. In a standards-driven environment, the shift to student performance requires that teachers have a repertoire of approaches that target specific goal areas or standards.

Intercultural Competence

Increasingly, language educators contend that foreign language learning should increase students' intercultural competence (IC) which would allow them to see relationships between different cultures, mediate across these cultures, and critically analyze cultures including their own (Chapelle, 2010). Language teachers have now recognized their role in eliciting culture learning in their classrooms and ways to access that learning (Moloney and Harbon, 2010). One such way proposed by Schulz (2007) is through utilization of culture-learning portfolios. According to Schulz, the teaching of intercultural competence should include developing awareness of variables that affect communicative interactions, recognizing stereotypes and evaluating them, and developing awareness of types of causes for cultural misunderstandings between members of different cultures. The use of a culture-learning portfolio allows teachers to assess students' progress over time based on specific objectives that can be related to individual student interest. These portfolios encourage critical reflection and self-evaluation and, especially important in the area of cultural learning, the use of multiple sources of evidence (Schulz, 2007: p. 18). Despite much research into effective strategies and approaches to teaching and assessing intercultural competency in foreign language classrooms (particularly in the United States), several challenges have been put forward. One such challenge is that of sensitizing students to the value of seeing the world through the language/culture of another and creating a more affective climate for developing intercultural competency in an environment where a monolingual monocultural national linguistic identity rules at home and global English rules abroad (Fonseca-Greber, 2010: p. 117).

Foreign Languages: Future Directions

One area that remains controversial in the world of foreign and second language teaching today is the question: Is native-like attainment a necessary or desirable goal in the global world we live in today? In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the question of whether speakers should conform to native speaker norms of English in light of its increasing use in international contexts has been widely debated in recent years (Timmis, 2002). In light of this issue many scholars in the field have raised the question of why native speaker communities are most often a model for learners of English as an international language. In reaction to this, a deluge of terms have been developed (e.g., Global English, International English, International Standard English, World English, or World Englishes) some of which challenge the idea that only native speaker community varieties are valued (McArthur, 2001). Proponents of the term 'Global Englishes,' for example, promote the idea that English belongs to all who use it, however they use it (p. 4).

Another important direction in research that requires more attention is use and effect of computer technology on foreign language learning. As classroom tasks become more focused on real-world issues, texts, or events, and problem-solving-based tasks, technology introduces a new dimension to the teaching and learning process that incorporates the use of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Skype, Voice Thread, and others. Digital media allows students to manipulate learn-

ing materials and language at their own pace and according to individual needs. Students examine reports, authentic documents, and web pages to find information that can be synthesized and discussed later and can collaborate electronically with youth from around the world. In such a learning environment the role of the teacher changes from one of authority figure or expert who delivers knowledge to one who facilitates, guides, and supports student learning. The teacher assumes greater responsibilities in designing and supporting individual and personalized learning tasks. This has tremendous implications for teacher educators and teacher trainers to act as agents of change as they foster language learning through the use of public pedagogy and critical media literacy. One of the most effective research methodologies that emerged in the last few years has been action research. Inquiring into one's own instructional practices through classroom-based investigations, teachers actively contribute to the research endeavor and change practices based on findings. Such research promises to improve teaching practices that are of interest to both researchers and teachers.

Methodologically classroom-oriented research has been largely conducted within the framework of correlational approaches, case studies, survey research, ethnographic research, experiments, and discourse analysis (Johnson, 1992). While the choice of research method is largely determined by the nature of the research question to be investigated, or by the hypothesis to be tested, thoughtful combinations of qualitative and quantitative research on foreign/second language learning conditions will provide valuable insights into language acquisition processes. Greater use of qualitative and mixed methods investigating students in their classrooms with special attention to cultural, situational, and longitudinal contexts is needed and recommended. As foreign language research draws on related disciplines (psychology, psycholinguistics, neurobiology, neurolinguistics, sociology, and linguistics) to better explain conditions that lead to greater language proficiency and differential success among foreign language learners, a deeper understanding of how languages are acquired and consequently how they should be taught will be gained. Furthermore, as learning and teaching innovations continue to be tested and researched, new insights will be gained that will influence teaching practices globally.

See also: Chomsky, Noam (1928-); Communicative Competence: Linguistic Aspects; Language Acquisition; Multilingualism; Second Language Acquisition; Teacher Education; Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory.

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