

Exploring Language Pedagogy through Second Language Acquisition Research

Rod Ellis and Natsuko Shintani



Routledge Introductions to Applied Linguistics

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Series editors' introduction

The Introductions to Applied Linguistics series

This series provides clear, authoritative, up-to-date overviews of the major areas of applied linguistics. The books are designed particularly for students embarking on masters-level or teacher-education courses, as well as students in the closing stages of undergraduate study. The practical focus will make the books particularly useful and relevant to those returning to academic study after a period of professional practice, and also to those about to leave the academic world for the challenges of language-related work. For students who have not previously studied applied linguistics, including those who are unfamiliar with current academic study in English-speaking universities, the books can act as one-step introductions. For those with more academic experience, they can also provide a way of surveying, updating and organising existing knowledge.

The view of applied linguistics in this series follows a famous definition of the field by Christopher Brumfit as

The theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue.

(Brumfit 1995: 27)

In keeping with this broad problem-oriented view, the series will cover a range of topics of relevance to a variety of language-related professions. While language teaching and learning rightly remain prominent and will be the central preoccupation of many readers, our conception of the discipline is by no means limited to these areas. Our view is that while each reader of the series will have their own needs, specialities and interests, there is also much to be gained from a broader view of the discipline as a whole. We believe there is much in common between all enquiries into language-related problems in the real world, and much to be gained from a comparison of the insights from one area of applied linguistics with another. Our hope therefore is that readers and course designers will not choose only those volumes relating to their own particular interests, but also use this series to construct a wider knowledge and understanding of the field, and the many cross-overs and resonances between its various areas. Thus the topics to be covered are wide in range, embracing an exciting mixture of established and new areas of applied linguistic enquiry.

The perspective on applied linguistics in this series

In line with this problem-oriented definition of the field, and to address the concerns of readers who are interested in how academic study can inform their own professional practice, each book follows a structure in marked contrast to the usual movement *from theory to practice*. In this series, this usual progression is presented back to front. The argument moves *from* Problems, *through* Intervention, and *only* finally to Theory. Thus each topic begins with a survey of everyday professional problems in the area under consideration, ones which the reader is likely to have encountered. From there it proceeds to a discussion of intervention and engagement with these problems. Only in a final section (either of the chapter or the book as a whole) does the author reflect upon the implications of this engagement for a general understanding of language, drawing out the theoretical implications. We believe this to be a truly *applied* linguistics perspective, in line with the definition given above, and one in which engagement with real-world problems is the distinctive feature, and in which professional practice can both inform and draw upon academic understanding.

Support to the Reader

Each chapter concludes with a list of questions to help readers review the contents and reflect on some of the key issues. The book also provides a glossary of key terms.

The series complements and reflects the Routledge Handbook of Applied Linguistics edited by James Simpson, which conceives and categorises the scope of applied linguistics in a broadly similar way.

Ronald Carter
Guy Cook

Reference

- Brumfit, C. J. (1995) Teacher Professionalism and Research. In G. Cook and B. Seidlhofer (eds) *Principle and Practice in Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 27–42.

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Part I

Introduction

There are many 'introductions' to second language acquisition (SLA) theory and research (e.g. Ellis, 2008; Ortega, 2009; Gass and Selinker, 2001). These books aim to survey the research and theory that has investigated and explained how learners acquire an additional language. The field of SLA is dynamic and growing and doubtlessly there is a continuing need for an updated survey. However, that is not the purpose of this book. Our aim is to draw on SLA theory and research to examine pedagogical issues and problems. Our starting point is not SLA but language pedagogy. We want to explore to what extent various pedagogical practices are supported by what is currently known about how learners acquire another language. Thus we are not seeking to 'apply' SLA to language pedagogy but rather to 'use' it as a resource to investigate the kinds of claims that characterize pedagogical accounts of how to teach a language.

Language teaching is an inherently practical affair while SLA constitutes a research discipline. As Hirst (1966) pointed out:

To try to understand the nature and pattern of some *practical discourse* in terms of the nature and patterns of some purely *theoretical discourse* can only result in its being radically misconceived.

(p. 40)

In terms of language teaching, 'practical discourse' refers to the moment-by-moment decisions that teachers make in the process of conducting a lesson and that manifest themselves in teaching-as-interaction. In making these decisions, teachers typically draw on their 'practical knowledge' of what works in a specific instructional context – knowledge shaped more by experience than study. 'Theoretical discourse' embodies the 'technical knowledge' that is available in expository accounts of teaching and learning. It consists of statements about what and how to teach and the theoretical rationale for these. Language teachers may also draw on this technical knowledge both in planning a lesson and in implementing it in the classroom, although teachers' primary concern with practical action does not readily allow for the application of technical knowledge. 'Technical knowledge', however, is important. It serves as a resource that teachers can use when planning a lesson and also, less easily, when coping with the exigencies of real-time teaching. It also provides a body of information that teachers can draw on to reflect on their teaching and to experiment with new possibilities.

This book explores 'technical knowledge' about teaching and learning. This type of knowledge itself, however, is not monolithic. The kind of technical knowledge found in teacher guides is fundamentally different from the kind of technical

knowledge found in published research about language teaching and learning. We refer to the former as 'pedagogic discourse' and the latter as 'research-based discourse'. The differences are evident in their epistemological bases. Pedagogic discourse draws on authors' prior knowledge of such discourse and on their own practical experience of teaching a language. As Underhill (in Scrivener, 2005) wrote in his general introduction to the MacMillan Books for Teachers 'we take a "Learning as you go approach" in sharing our experience with you' (p. 9). Pedagogic discourse is intended for teachers and thus is written in a form that is accessible to this audience. Its aim is to be 'practical' – to offer suggestions for what might work in the classroom. Research-based discourse, in contrast, draws on well-established formats for conducting and reporting confirmatory and descriptive research in order to demonstrate validity or trustworthiness. It is intended for fellow researchers and although it may propose a number of 'practical' applications, it is primarily directed at theory-testing or theory-building. Frequently, it is couched in language that is not accessible to outsiders. However, in Hirst's terms both pedagogic discourse and research-based discourse constitute 'theoretical discourse'.

This book is an exploration of the relationship between the pedagogic discourse found in teacher guides (e.g. Harmer, 1998; Hedge, 2000; Ur, 1996; Scrivener, 2005) and in the research-based discourse found in published SLA research. It seeks to examine the proposals for teaching found in the guides in the light of the findings of SLA research. It delves into the theoretical assumptions that underlie the practical proposals found in the guides and then attempts to evaluate these through reference to SLA research.

In adopting this approach, we were aware of a number of problems. First, the distinction between pedagogic discourse and research-based discourse is not always clear-cut. Some (but certainly not all) authors of the teacher guides are familiar with SLA theory and research findings and drew on these in shaping the advice they offered teachers. We struggled at times with deciding what constituted 'pedagogic discourse' and 'research-based discourse'. For example, some of the writings of one author of this book (Rod Ellis) are both 'pedagogic' and 'research-based'. Clearly there are hybrid discourses. Many SLA researchers also position themselves as teacher educators. We resolved this problem by electing to focus on a well-defined set of teacher guides and practical articles about language teaching whose intended audience was clearly teachers, on the one hand, and books and articles plainly intended to provide information about SLA and primarily directed at researchers or would-be researchers, on the other.

Another problem is that the teacher guides do not always agree about specific proposals although, on the whole, we did find a high level of commonality in the positions they adopted. There is, for example, general agreement that teachers should avoid excessive metalanguage when teaching grammar and that they should use a variety of corrective feedback strategies when correcting learner errors. In part, the recommendations for teaching found in guides appear to reflect received opinion about what constitutes effective teaching. SLA researchers also do not present a uniform picture. In particular, there are clear differences in how interactionist-cognitive theories and Sociocultural Theory view second language (L2) acquisition. We have attempted to address these differences by pointing them out and by offering alternative evaluations of the pedagogic proposals we discuss.

In short, this book aims at what Widdowson (1990a) termed a 'conceptual evaluation' of a set of established pedagogic practices as reflected in the pedagogic

literature through reference to what is currently known about how learners learn an L2. The aim is not to demonstrate that established pedagogic practices lack validity but rather to submit them to scrutiny. We have attempted to make use of one type of theoretical discourse (research-based discourse about SLA) to examine the claims found in a different type of theoretical discourse (pedagogic discourse). Our hope is that in this way it will be possible to achieve a symbiosis to the mutual benefit of each.

We are aware that the tentative conclusions that we arrive at as a result of our evaluation will not always be accepted by either teacher educators or SLA researchers. Many of the issues we address are controversial. The conclusions we offer reflect *our* interpretations of both the nature of the pedagogic proposals and the SLA research. Other interpretations and, therefore, other conclusions are doubtlessly possible. But by offering our own views we hope to stimulate debate between those engaged in these two types of theoretical discourse.

In line with our stated purpose, the majority of the chapters in this book take as their starting point a specific pedagogic construct or proposal, which is then considered from the perspective of SLA research. However, we feel that it will help readers not familiar with work in SLA if they are given a brief introduction to SLA. This is the purpose of the chapter in this opening section of the book – to set the scene for the subsequent chapters by providing the reader with a general background in SLA. To this end the chapter offers a brief historical survey of SLA, tracing the development of SLA over the five or so decades since its inception. Then, drawing on a general survey of work in SLA, it presents a number of general principles about instructed second language learning. These principles will serve as a point of reference for the evaluation of the specific pedagogical issues addressed in the chapters that follow.

1 Instructed second language acquisition

As a field of study, SLA is relatively new. While there had been interest in L2 learning for a long time, the empirical study of how an L2 is actually learned began relatively recently, dating from the 1960s when some of the first studies were undertaken. We begin by tracing the development of SLA from the early years to today, move on to consider key areas of research in SLA and conclude with a number of general principles of instructed SLA.

Behaviourist vs mentalist accounts of L2 learning

Interest in investigating L2 learning empirically originated in the challenges to behaviourist theory. This viewed L2 learning as the same as any other kind of learning, including L1 acquisition. It treated language learning as a mechanical process of habit formation, which involved ‘conditioning’ (i.e. the association of an environmental stimulus with a particular response produced automatically through repetition and with the help of reinforcement). This view of learning was challenged by Chomsky (1959) in his review of Skinner’s *Verbal Behaviour*. Chomsky argued that L1 acquisition was distinct from other kinds of learning and could not be explained in terms of habit-formation. He staked out a strong case for viewing it as a mental rather than a behavioural phenomenon. Learning happened *inside* the learner’s head and was driven by an innate capacity for language (what Chomsky then called the ‘language acquisition device’). Verbal behaviour was simply a manifestation of what had been learned not the source of learning. This led a number of applied linguists to ask whether L2 learning was a matter of behaviourally induced habits or a mental phenomenon governed primarily by internal mechanisms.

Behaviourist accounts of learning viewed old habits as an impediment to the formation of new habits. Applied to L2 learning this meant that the learner’s L1 was a source of interference, resulting in errors. According to mentalist accounts of L2 learning, however, learners draw on their innate language learning capacity, to construct a distinct system, which came to be called ‘interlanguage’ (Selinker, 1972). Learning was seen not as the accumulation of correct habits but as an organic process of gradual approximation to the target language. It followed from such a position, that errors were not just due to the influence of the L1 but also the product of the learner’s ‘creative construction’ of the L2. The competing claims of behaviourist and mentalist accounts of

learning led to research that investigated: (1) the nature of the errors that learners produced and (2) whether L2 learning was a matter of accumulated habits, or a process that involved stage-like progression in the acquisition of specific grammatical features.

Early research in SLA provided clear evidence that many of the errors that learners produced were intralingual rather than interlingual. That is, to a large extent they were universal (i.e. all learners irrespective of their L1 background make the same errors). Such errors were the product of omissions (e.g. 'She sleeping'), additions (e.g. 'We didn't went there'), misinformations (e.g. 'The dog ated the chicken') and disorderings (e.g. 'What daddy is doing?') – see Dulay et al. (1982). These errors, it was claimed, were 'developmental' in the sense that they arose as a result of the learner attempting to confirm or disconfirm hypotheses about the target language on the basis of limited experience (Richards, 1971). Furthermore, many of the errors L2 learners were seen to make were the same as those found in L1 acquisition, suggesting that they would disappear in due course. In other words, errors were no longer viewed as evidence of non-learning but as part and parcel of the natural process of learning a language.

Early SLA research also involved case studies of naturalistic L2 learners (i.e. learners who were learning through exposure to the L2 rather than through formal instruction) – see, for example, the longitudinal studies reported in Hatch (1978a). These descriptive studies provided evidence about two important characteristics of L2 acquisition. They showed that learners mastered grammatical morphemes such as English plural-*s*, past tense-*ed*, and third person-*s* in a fixed order suggesting that they had their own built-in-syllabus, which they followed irrespective of differences in their L1 or the linguistic environment in which they were learning. Also, and arguably more importantly, they did not master such features one by one but rather gradually, often taking months to fully acquire a specific feature. The acquisition of structures such as English negatives and interrogatives was characterized by a series of transitional stages as learners approximated step by step to the target structure. For example, an early stage in the acquisition of negatives typically involved using 'no' before a verb (e.g. 'No coming today'), followed later by the use of 'not' after an unmarked auxiliary verb (e.g. 'He do not come') and finally the use of 'not' after auxiliary verbs correctly marked for tense and number (e.g. 'He did not come yesterday').

The case studies of naturalistic learners also provided evidence of three other general aspects of L2 acquisition. Some learners – adults as well as children – elect for a 'silent period' during which they function only as listeners. After time when they have acquired some L2 resources through listening, they begin to speak. Their early speech often consists of formulaic chunks – either complete routines such as 'I don't know' or patterns which have one or more empty slots (e.g. 'Can I have a – ?'). Subsequently, researchers have suggested that L2 acquisition proceeds when learners are able to break down these fixed chunks into their parts and in so doing discover their grammatical properties.

In other words, they bootstrap their way to grammar. As this takes place learners start to produce their own ‘creative’ utterances, but these typically involve both structural simplification (i.e. they omit grammatical words and inflections) and also semantic simplification (i.e. they omit content words when these can be inferred from the context). For example, they produce sentences such as ‘Mariana no coming’ when meaning ‘Mariana isn’t coming today’.

Interlanguage theory

These findings could not be explained by a behaviourist view of learning. L2 learning was clearly not a matter of externally driven habit-formation but rather a learner-driven, organic process of gradual development. This led to the claim that learners possessed an *interlanguage* (Selinker, 1972) – that is, they constructed an internal system of rules that was independent of both the learner’s L1 and the target language and which evolved gradually over time. Subsequent research was directed at uncovering the characteristics of this interlanguage. These are summarized in Table 1.1. It should be noted, however, that some of the claims made by early interlanguage theory have subsequently been challenged. For example, not all SLA researchers now agree that fossilization occurs. Some current theories of L2 acquisition emphasize that learning never ceases completely as small changes are ongoing in any person’s language system (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2006).

Input and interaction

The recognition that L2 learning is best explained in terms of interlanguage theory led researchers to ponder what role the linguistic environment played. Self-evidently, learning can only take place when learners are exposed to input. In the 1980s, researchers began to ask questions such as ‘What kind of input are learners exposed to?’ and ‘How can interaction facilitate the process of interlanguage development?’ These are questions that have continued to inform SLA right up to today.

Early research on input focused on *foreigner talk*. This was the special register that native speakers adopt when talking to non-native speakers. Research showed that under some circumstances native speakers resort to ungrammatical foreigner talk – for example, they delete copula *be*, omit auxiliaries and articles, use the base form of the verb and special constructions such as ‘no + verb’. Interestingly, many of these features of foreigner talk are the same as those observed in learners’ interlanguage. However, not all foreigner talk is ungrammatical. Simplifying input to make it comprehensible to learners need not entail ungrammatical modifications. Teachers rarely use ungrammatical foreigner talk.

The input addressed to L2 learners, even when it was grammatical, was found to be characterized by a number of ‘modifications’. That is, when native speakers addressed learners, in comparison to when they addressed other