

Volume 2

*Supported by the Li Ka Shing Foundation*

# *Review of Applied Linguistics in China*

*Issues in Language Learning and Teaching*



English Language Center Shantou University

汕头大学英语语言中心



Higher Education Press

高等教育出版社

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# ***Review of Applied Linguistics in China***

## ***Issues in Language Learning and Teaching***

**Volume 2**

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## ***Review of Applied Linguistics in China***

### *Issues in Language Learning and Teaching*

The dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a time of tremendous challenge and enormous potential for the English language in China, as well as the fields of TESOL and Applied Linguistics in general. With its recent accession to the WTO, the long-awaited 2008 Olympics in Beijing, and new language policies all calling for higher levels of English proficiency, China has made learning English a national priority. With nearly a quarter of the world's population, China also poses stimulating challenges for language researchers and theorists alike. The concept of "World Englishes," for example, will inevitably take on new relevance as more and more Chinese speakers of English enter the world stage. In addition, classroom realities in China will necessitate a more contextualized understanding of language learning, as well as the expansion of sites where researchers and teaching professionals can interact more fully and fruitfully.

To address these areas of pressing need, *Review of Applied Linguistics in China (RALC)* has emerged as a semi-annual publication by the English Language Center at Shantou University in China. Peer-refereed, *RALC* is dedicated to classroom-oriented research in English language learning and teaching, including the exploration of vital issues related to the teaching English in China and the learning and use of English by Chinese speakers worldwide. This theory-driven, research-based, and practice-oriented publication also strives to provide a vibrant interactive forum for researchers and practitioners at all levels of instruction in the fields of TESOL and Applied Linguistics. It is open to contributors from around the globe with experience researching or teaching in China, or with students whose first language is Chinese.

Key to the success of this serial publication is an editorial board consisting of top-notch researchers and practitioners who

have learned or taught English in Chinese contexts, and/or are familiar with teaching Chinese students at home and abroad. They are experienced and genuinely concerned with issues related to the teaching, learning, and use of English by Chinese speakers. In addition, a rigorous, two-step review process ensures a high level of professional integrity and relevance.

The core of each issue is comprised of **full length, research-based articles** dedicated to a range of contemporary topics such as:

- ☐ Curriculum development and syllabus design
- ☐ Teaching methodology and reflective teaching
- ☐ Evaluation, assessment, and testing
- ☐ Materials development
- ☐ E-learning, distance learning, and cooperative learning
- ☐ Non-native English teacher education, professional standards, and development
- ☐ Language program administration and evaluation
- ☐ Classroom-oriented research methodology
- ☐ Second and foreign language learning and development
- ☐ Sociocultural and sociopolitical aspects of language learning and teaching
- ☐ Affective variables in language learning
- ☐ Contrastive rhetoric issues pertinent to Chinese speakers of English
- ☐ Chinese students studying abroad

Each issue also contains an **interview** with a top researcher in the field. Addressed in the interview section are the researcher's evaluation of the current field, his/her thoughts on questions pertinent to the field, and perspectives on future directions of study.

Next, a **mentoring column** is intended to provide a valuable

connection between researchers and practitioners, and to guide research in areas where there are specific needs based on in-practice problems. Classroom teachers are encouraged to submit issues they have encountered in teaching English to Chinese native speakers. These practitioners will provide a description of the learning context, a brief account of the problem encountered, and any tentative solutions. The challenge will then be given to an expert in the field, who will respond with an analysis of the problem, a suggested research design and guidelines for implementing data collection, practical suggestions for classroom use, and a recommended reading list.

Finally, *RALC* publishes **reviews** of recent books and software in the field. In particular, *RALC* welcomes comparative discussions of several publications that are related to one topical category (e.g., contrastive rhetoric, reading-writing connection, pronunciation). Review articles should provide a description and evaluative comparison of materials or software, and discuss their relevant impact on classroom practice, as well as teacher education.

With its emphasis on contemporary issues in Applied Linguistics and TESOL viewed through the Chinese contextual lens, *RALC* serves as a focal point for language researchers and teaching practitioners interested in China and Chinese learners of English.

We would like to thank Li Ka Shing Foundation and Shantou University for their encouragement and generous support for this publication. We would also like to thank Higher Education Press for their support in bringing this volume into print and in making it available to the academic circle of Applied Linguistics in China.

### In this issue

The second issue of *Review of Applied Linguistics in China* (*RALC*) has developed from presentations made during the Second Annual International Symposium held on April 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>, 2005 at Shantou University. The topic of the symposium was "Contextualizing Communicative Competence," and much of the attention focused on the idea of achieving a balance between teaching communicative skills and teaching grammar, specifically



in the context of the Chinese EFL classroom, where realities such as large class size and an emphasis on nationally-designed tests present teachers with a unique set of pedagogical challenges. Other topics of interest included the status of English as a global language, the need for learner autonomy, and the use of multi-media and computer technology in language teaching. In this issue:

- Tom Scovel examines research findings from the diverse fields of Second Language Acquisition and Psycholinguistics to show how a variety of factors, from the interference of native language to the limitations of memory, can affect one's ability to achieve competence in a second language. He argues that it is the complex interaction of these factors, along with variables such as context and individual learning styles, which makes the very notion of communicative competence so problematic. Although age remains one factor under consideration, Scovel cautions against introducing foreign languages too early in a child's education.
- Claire Kramsch points out that in today's increasingly interconnected world, neither the "bureaucratic" tradition of grammar translation nor the more "entrepreneurial" concept of communicative competence is sufficient to produce speakers who can cope with the fast-paced, unpredictable nature of globalization. Therefore, she suggests re-evaluating the "social semiotic" at the heart of both traditions in order to locate a point of commonality that would allow for the creation of a new approach to teaching language in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century - one that recognizes the vital importance of negotiation in the realization of individual and collective goals.
- Diane-Larsen Freeman reiterates the difficulties involved in defining communicative competence, not only in terms of its necessary components (i.e., grammatical, pragmatic, discourse and strategic competence), but also in terms of its context, which is dependent on both the situation and

participants. To help learners better cope with the wide array of communicative possibilities, she recommends adopting a multi-dimensional approach to grammar teaching, which dispenses with memorized formulas in favor of form, meaning, and use as a means of achieving greater learner autonomy.

- ❑ Don Snow evaluates the results of self-directed language learning projects designed by students in his teaching methods class. He provides theoretical support for such an undertaking, maintaining that through self-assessment and self-reflection, learners gain a better understanding of the language learning process, as well as more autonomy. He notes both the successes and shortcomings of the projects, including problems resulting from over-ambitious goals, lack of motivation, and time constraints. In the end, however, he regards such projects as particularly useful for increasing learner awareness and experimentation in a second language.
- ❑ In an interview with Xin Wang of *21<sup>st</sup> Century ELT Review*, Jun Liu provides a chronicle of his career from his first job lecturing at a teacher's college in China to his recent election as TESOL president. He talks at length about the honor of being the first non-native English speaker to hold that position and the responsibilities associated with it. He offers his vision for the future of the organization and discusses the changes he has witnessed in the field over the past few decades, as well as the way he believes technology will affect the roles of teacher and student in the near future.
- ❑ In our mentoring column, writing instructor Na Li questions the effectiveness of her teaching approach, which although intended to raise awareness of the purpose and process of writing, only seems to generate complaints and disinterest among her students. In response, Ed Nicholson offers his insights about one possible cause: student moti-

vation, or the lack thereof. He suggests several ways in which Li might better engage her students' attention, including applying a more communicative approach in order to create a truly interactive learning environment. He also recommends selected readings to further assist her in dealing with this problem.

- Tracy Davis and Kara McBride contribute reviews. Davis looks at a new textbook by David Paul that employs a wide-range of strategies, including scaffolding and clustering, to help learners develop the necessary communicative skills in English. McBride looks at Mark Boardman's recent contribution to the *Intertext* series; this particular volume provides historical and technical background information about the Internet, as well as discussion topics and activities related to using and developing websites in the English language classroom.

# Learning Communicative Competence: Insights from Psycholinguistics and SLA

Thomas Scovel

San Francisco State University

*Learning to communicate in any language is an enormously complex task that is dependent on at least six types of interaction. First, as decades of second language acquisition (SLA) research have shown, there is competition from both the learner's mother tongue and from irregular patterns in the language to be acquired. Second, individual variables such as motivation and learning styles affect the speed and ultimate success of acquisition. Third, as psychological and psycholinguistic (PL) research has proven, various types of memory interact with the learner's ability to store and recall new information in the target language. A fourth kind of interaction is the effect of top/down and bottom/up processing strategies which PL studies have identified as crucial to effective listening and reading comprehension. Social interaction also proves to be important in language acquisition since meaning must be socially constructed and negotiated in any form of linguistic communication. Finally, ultimate success in language acquisition is, in part, the result of age, although this paper will conclude by arguing that critical period research does not support the current trend to teach English to young children.*

## Introduction

Both the concept of communicative competence (CC) and the fields of psycholinguistics (PL) and second language acquisition (SLA) are extremely broad topics, and so it is impossible to deal with even one of these in more than a superficial manner in a short article. CC is an abstract concept which attempts to define the broad range of behaviors and competencies a proficient speaker of one or more languages has mastered. PL refers to an interdisciplinary field which examines a wide range of ways in which human language and speech can provide windows to mental abilities and operations; it is frequently seen as part of the currently popular discipline called "cognitive science," which includes

neurolinguistics, artificial intelligence, formal linguistics, etc., and if viewed in this manner, encompasses an even wider field of inquiry. SLA, a relatively new area of study, examines the variables that affect the course of acquiring a second language and, in some ways, could almost be seen as a branch of PL. Admitting therefore that the title I have chosen embraces an enormously vast amount of material to cover in such a brief review, I would like to introduce this paper with a story and a word. Both are of Chinese origin, which happens to match my upbringing, but more significantly, they fit the audience whom I was initially addressing.<sup>1</sup>

The story is reputedly told of Zhuangzi, a fifth century B.C. philosopher and a prominent disciple of Laozi. Two of Zhuangzi's students were looking at a flag fluttering in the breeze on a windy day when the first said, "Look at the flag waving!" The second immediately objected, "No, it's not the flag that you see moving but the wind." To which the first quickly countered, "But you're wrong; you can't see the wind move, only the flag!" Finally, they decided to go to their master to resolve the dispute. When they found Zhuangzi, the first disciple asked, "Isn't it true Master that we see the flag moving?" Zhuangzi replied, "No, the flag is not moving." The second disciple instantly rejoined with some confidence, "Ah, then I am right; it is the wind that is moving!" But surprisingly, the Master replied, "No, you are also mistaken; the wind is not moving either." Perplexed, the students looked at their Master for a resolution, and after a pause; he responded, "It is neither the flag nor the wind that is moving — it is your mind that is moving."

I like to think of Zhuangzi as the world's first cognitive psychologist, because his simple response captures the essence of modern psychology, and also of PL and SLA. Perception and cognition are not driven solely by external stimuli but are mediated by the mental life of individuals. In one sense, then, my contribution is simply an attempt to show how the human mind shapes the

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<sup>1</sup> "Learning communicative competence: Insights from psycholinguistics" was originally an address delivered on April 9, 2005 at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual International Symposium on English Language Teaching in China at Shantou University.

movement of language and speech in the learning of CC.

The essence of this article can be summarized even more succinctly if we subscribe to the philosophy expressed in an old Chinese proverb: *yi yan bu zhong, wan yan wu yong!* ("If one word doesn't hit the mark, then even 10 000 are useless!"). An even terser introduction of what I am attempting to do here can be summarized in a single word: *interaction*. Most of the insights that PL and SLA provide to our understanding of how CC is learned are based on the interaction between important linguistic and psychological factors.

One final introductory comment concerns the definition of CC. Although there have been several recent and perhaps more rigorous attempts to redefine this concept (see Bachman & Palmer, 1996), I will use the four-part system of classification first introduced by Canale & Swain in their seminal 1980 article. For them, full CC in a second language requires learning grammatical, pragmatic, discourse, and strategic competencies in the target language. Grammatical competence includes morphosyntactic and lexical accuracy and fluency. Pragmatic competence comprises appropriate pragmatic and sociolinguistic use in face-to-face communication and other forms of social dialogue. Discourse competence consists of knowledge about how to recognize and produce texts and genres in spoken and written discourse. Finally, strategic competence refers to the ability to repair communication breakdowns and to select alternatives when communication is disrupted.

In any discussion of CC, it is important to make one point clear, especially since CC is the foundation of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach which underlies so much of modern language teaching. As is often the case in language teaching methodology, a revolutionary new approach is taken to be the direct rejection of a formerly popular traditional one. Therefore, with the current popularity of CLT, CC is often seen as the exact opposite of grammatical competence, characterized most transparently by the grammar-translation method. Over the past few decades, I have often heard Chinese teachers of English say that in

the past they taught *grammatical* competence, but now they teach *communicative* competence. This is an entirely false and misleading dichotomy.

CC does not reject the importance of grammatical knowledge. After all, the very first competence cited by Canale & Swain (1980) is the learning of grammar. In other words, how can anyone learn to communicate effectively in another language if they are not aware of the most fundamental grammatical and lexical patterns of the target language? The essential difference, therefore, between CC (and by implication, CLT) and the traditional grammar-translation method is that proponents of the latter often stopped at grammatical knowledge, assuming somehow that grammatical accuracy and fluency is sufficient in order to communicate effectively. CC does not neglect grammatical competence; it simply builds upon it by emphasizing that other skills need to be acquired if one is to become a fluent and accurate speaker of another language. In this sense, CC in a second language is no different from CC in one's mother tongue. Having made this point, it is now time to examine ways in which the interaction of various PL and SLA factors influences the learning of CC in human languages.

### **Interaction between languages**

It is important to begin by pointing out that SLA has been an autonomous field of inquiry for several decades with its own journals, conferences, and specialists completely independent from PL. When we take up the topic of interaction between languages, clearly the most influential work has been undertaken by specialists in SLA. Although linguists have long been interested in the interaction among languages, it is plausible to claim that the field of SLA began about fifty years ago with the publication of Lado's (1957) treatise on contrastive analysis. This book evolved from the work initiated at the University of Michigan by his mentors, Fries and Pike, and was related in some ways to earlier work carried out by linguists in Europe. Ironically, Lado's introduction to contrastive analysis was published the same year as Chomsky's first book, which introduced the notion of generative grammar that ultimately laid the foundation for some of the arguments rejecting a contrastive approach to SLA.

It is not the goal of this paper to summarize fifty years of SLA research, but suffice to say that the majority of this work has dealt with the interaction between languages characterized by three shifts in focus. Initially, the work by Lado and others looked almost exclusively at the way the learner's mother tongue influenced the acquisition of the target language, either positively via transfer or negatively via interference. This contrastive analysis view was rejected in the late 1960's when researchers like Corder (1967) and Selinker (1972) proposed that much of the linguistic interaction that accounts for SLA comes not so much from the mother tongue but from the patterns in the target language itself. Some proponents of this view even went so far as to claim that only about 5% of a learner's interlanguage stemmed from the influence of the mother tongue (Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, 1982). A third focus, which has characterized most of the work in SLA for the past twenty years or so, has been the general consensus that both mother tongue and target language interactions are important in shaping the acquisition of a new language, in addition to several other factors, such as the possible influence of universal grammar (Cook, 2001; Scovel, 2001). This contemporary approach also includes new and sophisticated research which supports the older contrastive analysis view that the mother tongue intervenes significantly in SLA (see Jiang, 2004).

A recent publication by Han (2004) does an excellent job of summarizing the copious research on language interaction in SLA, as well as attempting to explain *fossilization* (i.e., the tendency for most adult learners of a second language to continue to make errors, however slight, even after many years of study and use). From her review of almost fifty years of SLA studies, Han posits two general explanations for this near ubiquitous phenomenon: fossilization is caused by interaction between the learner's mother tongue and the target language; and it is based in part on age of acquisition, a topic to be discussed in the final section of this paper. In summary, decades of SLA research have conclusively proven that learning how to communicate in a new language is, in many ways, influenced by the interaction of several linguistic factors: the



competition between mother tongue and target language, the idiosyncratic patterns of second language itself, and the possible intervention of language universals.

### **Interaction with individual variables**

Of course, there are innumerable non-linguistic factors which shape both the speed and ultimate success of SLA. By far the most prominent of these are the psychological and personality characteristics of each individual learner. Ultimately, these individual variables play a more important role than general factors such as linguistic or psychological influences, and account for most of the wide variance seen in success or failure in English language teaching (ELT) or in the learning of any second language. This is why teaching a foreign language such as English is so complicated and cannot be neatly packaged into one or even several methods (Kumaravadivelu, 2003).

Virtually every introductory SLA textbook presents a broad spectrum of individual characteristics that can affect the learning of communicative competence in a second language (e.g., Brown, H. D., 2000; Ellis, 1994; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). The most comprehensive, best-referenced, and most up-to-date summary of this vast research can be found in Dornyei (2005). The individual variables which can impinge on language learning are diverse and copious; temperament, personality, aptitude, motivation, cognitive style, empathy, anxiety, and a willingness to communicate are among the most commonly mentioned. Many of these topics, however, are themselves complex constructs which are defined by competing models and sometimes yield conflicting research findings. Since the interaction of individual factors and the learning of CC is such an enormous area to consider, I will confine my examples to two individual studies of two of these factors: learning styles and motivation.

A recent and worthwhile representative of the research conducted on the interaction of learning styles with SLA attainment is the investigation of two advanced and successful Chinese learners of English by Gu (2003). Using think-aloud procedures, self-reports, and interviews, Gu provides a detailed account of the