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ABSTRACT

The problematic nature of research in the teaching of foreign languages discloses fundamental areas of concern, particularly related to secondary school teacher attitudes. Comments of leading researchers concerning the nature of research, purpose and design, responsibility for generation of research, and the use of research are cited extensively. Recent developments focus upon the need for teacher-training programs to shape "developers" of the art of teaching rather than "practitioners" of skills. A selected bibliography is included. (RL)

# THE STATUS OF RESEARCH IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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## I. Introduction

An agricultural specialist once remarked to a foreign language educator, "If we conducted research in agriculture the way you people in education do, the country would have been suffering from malnutrition long ago." The smile evoked by the humor of this remark soon fades to straight-faced reflection on a serious problem of education, even in this scientific age. The agriculturalist's teasing accusation can easily be confirmed by testimony from the educational researchers themselves. Campbell and Stanley, writing in 1963, state: "Good and Scates have documented a wave of pessimism, dating back to perhaps 1935, and have cited even that staunch advocate of experimentation, Monroe, as saying 'the direct contributions from controlled experimentation have been disappointing.'" (3:2) Campbell and Stanley support the experiment as, "the only means for settling disputes regarding educational practice, as the only way of establishing a cumulative tradition in which improvements can be introduced without the danger of a faddish discard of old wisdom in favor of inferior novelties." (3:2)

Turning now to the field of foreign language education, we observe that the problems of quantity and quality of research are, if anything, more acute in this area. The first convincing evidence which one encounters is that few studies have been conducted and reported. Even with increased availability of funds from various sources for research, the listings of studies have lengthened only slightly in recent years; and the funds often go unused by foreign language educators. Even more appalling is the fact that few people seem to be sufficiently interested in the paucity or the poor quality of research to so state in the journals. There is, however, adequate evidence of this nature to confirm the problem.

During the ten years between 1933 and 1943, only 66 studies were conducted in the foreign language field; and some of them were opinion studies rather than true research investigations. (2:864) Agard and Dunkel indicated in 1948 that "There is still a serious need for experiments designed to test one by one in carefully controlled situations these fundamental problems which confront the language teacher in his search for perfection." (1:300) In 1960 Carroll writes: "What concerns me is that with regard to many of the specific recommendations which have been made (concerning language teaching), there is almost a complete lack of research evidence on which one can rely in order to provide either support or refutation. We do not have an adequate basis in

empirical research for answering. . .important questions. . ." (9:129) In 1963 Carroll concluded his survey of the research in the foreign language field with the following remark: "Educational research has contributed very little to foreign language teaching methodology aside from general knowledge concerning the construction of achievement tests, the role of foreign language aptitude in the learning process, and the psychology of bilingualism. . . (7:1094) Carroll further points out in 1966 that foreign language educators had used a disappointingly small portion of the funds made available by the National Defense Education Act of 1958 for basic research in teaching methodology. (8:94) Rays of hope began to appear, however. During the same year, Carroll observed: "The number of research reports. . .published in the last five years is rather impressive. Perhaps partly due to the availability of funds from government sources, there has been a greater amount of research in the foreign language field than in comparable previous periods, and the quality of the research is steadily improving. Foreign language teachers undertaking research have learned the value of seeking professional assistance in matters of experimental design, statistical analysis, and test construction. Furthermore, we can now note with satisfaction that a number of well-trained psychologists have become interested in research problems relating to foreign language teaching and have organized a number of extremely interesting and promising research projects in foreign language learning and teaching. For the most part, these psychologists have had the good sense to draw on the experience of linguists and foreign language teachers concerning the design and conduct of their studies." (6:12-13)

The case seems clear. Although some progress has been made, much remains to be done. In several of his recent articles, Carroll enumerates problems which should be studied and establishes priorities in their importance. It is beyond the scope of this article to include a listing of these problems; however, we can point out, along with Carroll, that the needs range ". . .from the most theoretical research in psychology and linguistics to the most crassly practical compilation of nose-count statistics." (9:130)

## II. Definition and Purposes of Research

Research is defined as studious inquiry, usually carried out by means of critical and exhaustive investigation or experimentation within carefully controlled conditions, having as its purpose the testing of a given hypothesis. Its close alliance with theory, therefore, is obvious. Carroll states that ". . . the best research is based on theory and interacts with it, and the best theories are those that can be tested by empirical research." (8:94)

Concerning the role of research, we turn again to Carroll: "In a period when many new developments and new ideas are brought forth,

it is appropriate to think about the role of research and theory not only in guiding these new developments and new ideas but also in providing a sound basis for foreign language teaching in all its aspects." (8:93) This "sound basis" is what is often missing in our teaching. The tendency to operate on the basis of traditions and hunches is all too prevalent among us. The haranguing in recent years over this method or that attests to the fact that hunches have priority over theory, that most of the theory which we have has not been tested, and that we have often made inadequate or improper use of the few experimental results which we do have.

## III. Who is Responsible for Research?

The question of who is responsible for research is a basic one. It seems that in the past, few have assumed any responsibility for conducting or taking an interest in research in the foreign language area. Most of what has been accomplished has been done under the leadership of university staff. The need for extending the leadership is being advocated by some who are concerned that too little is being done. Pimsleur is among those appealing to the classroom teacher to assume a role: ". . .it is hoped that many teachers will be interested in studying further the area of research techniques, which are becoming more and more an indispensable part of the creative teacher's equipment." (15:163) He also indicates that, fortunately, "In keeping with the modern spirit of objective evidence, more and more teachers are performing experiments in their day-to-day classroom situations." (15:157) In the following remarks, Chomsky is not necessarily implying that the teacher should become a researcher, but he issues an earnest appeal to teachers to view new ideas with an interested but objective eye: "In general, the willingness to rely on 'experts' is a frightening aspect of contemporary political and social life. Teachers, in particular, have a responsibility to make sure that ideas and proposals are evaluated on their merits, and not passively accepted on grounds of authority, real or presumed. The field of language teaching is no exception. It is possible--even likely--that principles of psychology and linguistics, and research in these disciplines, may supply insights useful to the language teacher. But this must be demonstrated and cannot be presumed. It is the language teacher himself who must validate or refute any specific proposal. There is very little in psychology or linguistics that he can accept on faith." (11:45) Lane issues the appeal from another perspective. He recognizes that classroom research usually has to be small-scale in its dimensions, but the size does not diminish its importance: "Lest we too quickly abandon tried (if not true) methods and succumb to nothing more than a fad, we must use the classroom as a proving ground for new techniques. Furthermore, small-scale but rigorous research in the classroom can generate a wealth of provocative ideas and experimental findings. A most valuable

resource in improving modern language pedagogy is, therefore, you--the language teacher." (14:116)

It is this writer's opinion that the teachers' first responsibility is that of assuming a major role as initiators of research by identifying the problems. They are closer to these problems than any other segment of the profession. They can appeal to one of a number of sources for help. In some cases, a source is no further away than their central administrative office. College and university departments of education usually have qualified researchers who are willing to assist. Within the past decade, the department of education in almost every state has established or expanded its division of research. The supervisor of foreign language also has usually had some experience with research or is at least interested in experimentation. These people are eager to cooperate with local school officials and instructional personnel in investigating educational problems. Departments of education can often provide supporting funds, computer time, and channels for disseminating information as well as the consultative services of their own personnel.

The federal government has also made available more assistance to educators for conducting research. The National Defense Education Act of 1958 and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 were the first major sources of funds for foreign language teachers. In addition to the direct financial assistance available from these sources, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act regional research laboratories cooperate with universities, state departments of education, and local school board offices in projects of extensive nature.

Teachers' cooperation with their own administrators, state department of education personnel or university research specialists results in a teamwork approach to research. Such an approach has been advocated by Pimsleur: "The design and execution of an experiment, if it is to result in solid conclusions, profits from being the work of several people rather than of one person." (15:164) Roeming is of similar opinion: "It is important, therefore, that the teachers themselves take the initiative, survey their own potential to do serious research, seek out those who can assist with advice and concrete aid, and be specific and enthusiastic enough to gain the attention and support of all personnel in a school system who can be of assistance, especially the administrators and the school board. Universities and colleges are scattered throughout this country with such profusion that there is potential specialized assistance available to every teacher in this country at the cost of a 30-cent long distance telephone call. With such assistance a well designed proposal programed in detail, in which several types of professional talent are going to be made available to the researcher, will certainly

be given serious attention by the funding agency to which it is offered. But on a broader scale, it is my hope that. . .teachers will find greater opportunity to work in national teams on broadly designed research programs so that a much more vital understanding of the foreign language student and the second language learning process may be gained." (16:21) Obviously, the team should be composed of individuals of several divergent backgrounds so as to ensure competence in the supervision of all aspects of the study.

## IV. Factors Contributing to a Shortage of Quality Research

There are some attractions for the reseacher to engage in experimentation in the field of foreign language learning. ". . . it is one of the few areas of knowledge in which the students start from point zero in the classroom. The instruction can be programed. A large degree of control can be exercised over the stimuli, and reliable and valid measures of aptitude and achievement are available," states Carroll. (7:1060) Certainly the absence of much information on almost any topic creates a fertile field.

A far greater number of difficulties and problems, however, tend to discourage his interests. Some of these problems are described in the following paragraphs.

### A. The Teacher's Dilemma

Few teachers receive any training in research even though they may hold several degrees. Most are not even made aware, at any level of their professional preparation including the NDEA institute, of the implications of research for their job. If general education classes have been criticized for being too all-inclusive and nebulous, a converse accusation might be made of foreign language methodology classes. All too often the latter are narrowly specific, assuming a cook-book approach to training the teacher. A few basic ingredients are supplied, but such things as acquisition of theory and the establishment of an awareness of the role of research are left to someone else. "Potential teachers are being trained as practitioners of an art, not as maintainers and developers of the art," Roeming indicates. (16:18) Many unfortunate consequences result, among them: little interest among teachers in research; inability to identify researchable and research-worthy problems; inability to conduct classroom research; and an unwelcome attitude, even, in some cases, hostility to the researcher.

### B. The Administrator's Dilemma

The attitude and problems of the administrator are often similar to those of the teacher. Although it is true that the

administrator is more likely to have had training in research than the teacher, he usually looks upon his school as a place of learning to the point of excluding related endeavors. He is concerned with the immediate job of instruction, and he hires practitioners rather than developers. He is responsible to the parents who understand the role of research even less than the educators and who may consequently not want their sons and daughters used as "guinea pigs." Even the central office supervisor, director of instruction, or director of research is usually too concerned with the immediate to engage in research generalizable beyond the school district's boundaries.

## C. Instructional Problems

There are many factors associated with foreign language instruction which make it difficult to conduct research in foreign language teaching and learning. Several of the more obvious ones are described below:

1. Diversity of goals in teaching. It is commonly known that foreign language teachers unfortunately often proclaim goals to which they do not actually adhere in classroom instruction. Conversely, they sometimes teach more than they claim to do. It is thus likely that goals and instruction vary greatly from teacher to teacher; and it then becomes difficult to control important variables, even with a strict system of controls.

2. Isolation of variables. Carroll points out that "it is difficult. . .to vary one element of instruction experimentally without modifying the effect of other elements. The experimental control of a single variable, if carried out in connection with classroom instruction, may entail the revision of an entire textbook or series of tape recordings. Successful single-variable experiments are rare in foreign language teaching." (7:1064)

3. Difficulty of specifying and adhering to preassigned teaching conditions. Failure to understand the prescribed teaching conditions or the importance of them, and unanticipated circumstances often make the adherence to prescribed teaching conditions impossible. Further complicating this matter is the fact that when all is done, one often has no way of knowing whether the conditions of the experiment were adhered to or not.

## D. Measurement

The recent appearance of valid and reliable aptitude and achievement tests has not significantly diminished the problems

of measurement of foreign language instruction. Achievement testing is expensive and requires equipment which is often not available, and some aspects of it present scoring difficulties. Many teachers are not accustomed to administering standardized tests requiring the degree of skill that the achievement tests require. Some experiments dealing with specific details of instruction necessitate measurement for which appropriate tests are not available.

E. Time

Learning a language is a long, slow process. For many experiments concerned with language learning in general, a minimum of three years is required. Obviously, the longer the experiment, the more difficult it is to control variables: students drop out, fail and move; teachers change in nature and employment; groups often cannot be kept together.

F. Special Difficulties in the Nature of Language

Carroll points to a reason why research specialists are reluctant to work in the foreign language field or why they are likely to err when they do: "The specification of the stimuli presented and the observation of the learner's responses can demand a degree of sophistication in linguistic science or a knowledge of foreign languages which is not ordinarily possessed by the casual educational researcher." (7:1060)

G. Relationship Between the Research Specialist and the Teacher

Unfortunately, this relationship is often not a good one. If teachers have little or no training in research, they are not likely to appreciate the interests and purposes of the research specialist. They may even feel that their effectiveness is being questioned. Several writers point out that most research is now conducted by college and university professors. Unfortunately, their tendency to look upon high school or elementary teachers as subordinates rather than as colleagues discourages the development of a good working relationship.

V. The Use of Research

The problem of reluctance to use evidence resulting from completed research is perhaps as severe as the shortage of research. Roeming, editor of The Modern Language Journal, reports that he receives from teachers many protests such as the following: "All you are printing is research results. We need articles that help us improve our teaching." (16:18) This appears to be a sincere remark. Although it is indeed a naive and regrettable one, it is certainly not surprising. If teachers have no training in research, we

can hardly expect them to be interested in reading it or, for that matter, to know how to read and interpret it. All too many of the few reports on completed research therefore go ignored by those who might benefit the most from them.

It is also true that in some cases worthy research is not widely reported. This usually happens when a study is conducted because of local motivation and its directors do not recognize its relevance and value for others.

Misinterpretation is a significant problem in the consumption of research results. Chastain asserts that ". . .educators not familiar with research reporting, experimental design, and statistical analyses will merely turn to the last pages of the article and accept the author's conclusions without examining the content which led to those conclusions. Without at least a cursory understanding of the criteria. . . .[for evaluating research]. . . . , an educator leaves himself open to misinterpretation of the relatively scant number of research studies which have been reported." (10:498)

In addition to lack of training, teachers sometimes adopt one of two extreme attitudes upon reviewing a report. Because it is printed and thus should be categorized as unimpeachable "truth" or because it supports their own personal biases, they tend to accept it without question. Chastain states that it is disturbing to read and hear of the ready acceptance of the results of many studies in the absence of a true evaluation of the study itself. Too often it seems that the summary of results is accepted without a proper examination of its contents. (10:499) The problem may also be attributed to gullibility or too much faith in research. On the other hand, teachers may reject the research evidence because it does not support their biases.

The dichotomy previously referred to regarding the teacher and the researcher also impedes the use of available research results. The teacher's indictment that studies are often removed from the realities of the classroom is supported by many research specialists and individuals concerned with adequate and proper use of research in the foreign language field. Stanley and Campbell state that they are ". . .gradually coming to the view that experimentation within schools must be conducted by regular staff of the schools concerned, whenever possible, especially when findings are to be generalized to other classrooms." (10:497) Roeming writes: "The research in second-language learning and teaching that is so voluminously reported, conducted under exceptionally controlled conditions by experts who specialize in research design, cannot be effectively evaluated unless it is tested in the classrooms." (16:19) Carroll is more specific: "Some research workers have felt it wise to move in the direction of <u>miniature language learning settings</u> in which the objectives of the instruction can be

carefully controlled. . . The danger with such experiments is that the language teaching may become extremely artificial -- i.e.. . . . ., dissimilar to the procedures actually used by teachers, and also probably far from optimal in terms of proper programming of instruction." Carroll points out that the psychologists' verbal learning experiments are even further removed. (7:1065) On the other hand, he also suggests that ". . .we must check the demand that laboratory research imitate the classroom learning setting in all respects. . ." (8:101)

In addition to teachers, there are other consumers of research in foreign languages. Teacher trainers are prime among this group. Carroll advocates that they should stay abreast of research ". . .insofar as it yields information on what kinds of teaching procedures are most effective or desirable in other respects, because the best opportunity of getting teachers to learn to use these methods is at the point at which they are first trained to teach. We should remind ourselves that it is not only research specifically directed at modern foreign language teaching that teacher trainers need to know about but also the whole gamut of research on teacher behavior." (8:96)

Educational policy makers, too, need to stay informed of current developments. Indeed, they often ask the language supervisor or the teacher what evidence is available on a given topic. Ironically, they are sometimes among the first to know of recent studies in the foreign language field and to approach the defenseless language teacher with comments or questions about research with which he is not familiar.

Carroll includes the producer of teaching materials as another consumer of research but recognizes the fact that he is often not abreast of the latest findings: "He needs research results concerning the content and optimal organization of materials of instruction. The textbook writer who is careful to seek the answers to such questions and then applies them competently in developing his material is rare indeed." (8:97)

## VI. Recent Developments

The view is bleak, but not hopeless. The fact that most of the concern for the multiple problems associated with research in foreign languages has been expressed in recent journal articles is indicative of growing concern. In other words, some of our spokesmen are exercising new leadership in this area--leadership which will perhaps continue to grow.

A session of the Northeast Conference of 1966 dealt with a review of research, and the entire 1967 Northeast Conference was devoted exclusively to recent research activities in our field.

field was the establishment of the Educational Resources Information Center through the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages and the Modern Language Association. It promises to become the much needed distribution center for information in foreign languages.

The "Selective Bibliography on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1920-1966" by Birkmaier and Lange which was published in Foreign Language Annals (May, 1968) is a primary source for information on completed studies.

Other trends and developments have already been stated in or can be observed from the previous text of this article.

## VII. Conclusions

A review of the research itself reveals that it is in an embryonic stage of development. It is growing slowly, however, and one can hope that it will eventually emerge as a contributing force. Indeed, it must if we are to allay the arguments, solve the problems, and get on with the business of providing more effective language instruction for our students.

A response to Pimsleur's, Roeming's, and Carroll's call that the teacher become engaged in research would be a major step in the solution of the problem, but it is not an easy one.

Others have envisioned solutions to more specific aspects of the research problem. For example, Smith and Baranyi see the need for ". . .a center concerned with the continuing long-term study of foreign language education in the 'real school' environment, especially concerning itself with the transfer, replication, and dissemination of localized research and innovation to the broader context of the national curriculum." (17:114) They further believe that ". . .the first task of this center should be an Interpretive Study of Research and Innovation in Foreign Language Education written for the consumption of those most directly concerned with educational policy making and change, the school administrator, the school trustee, and the classroom teacher." (17: 114)

Carroll presents an innovative and interesting idea when he suggests that the foreign language profession needs an "analogue of the county agent" who in agriculture communicates the findings of agricultural research to the farmer right at his door. (8:98) He recognizes, however, that it would be difficult to find qualified personnel for this kind of liaison work, and he is not sure that we even have enough information to communicate at the present time. Perhaps it is, however, a worthwhile consideration for possible future application.

This writer believes that foreign language supervisory personnel at the local and state levels should assume a more aggressive attitude in solving foreign language research problems. His desk is at the crossroads; if anyone is exposed to developments in foreign language education, he is. He usually has channels of communication of various types which he could utilize in disseminating valuable information to the teachers. The supervisor is only one step removed from the classroom, and even then he is frequently in the classroom and in contact with the teachers. The alert supervisor, like the teacher, knows what the problems are. He normally has some data already in his hands which, if subjected to exhaustive analysis, could often yield valuable conclusions. Moreover, he is in an advantageous position for initiating, directing, or assisting with research projects. Also like the teacher, the supervisor is usually untrained for this aspect of his job, but he is in a better position to pull himself up by his own bootstraps. The supervisor's engagement in research would not only provide a needed service but an example of an inquiring and objective attitude toward problems and developments in foreign language teaching and learning.

Although very little reliable research now exists, it is likely that we will witness some improvements in this aspect of foreign language education in the years to come. The recent developments which we have indicated cannot fail to yield significant results. But only a beginning has been made. The real solution to the problem seems to be the same as that for most of our other difficulties: it is found within the teacher-training program. And if the pre-service teacher education program cannot impart all of the many requisites which are necessary for an effective teacher, it must at least shape individuals with inquiring minds who are developers of the art of teaching rather than practitioners of skills.

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