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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a current overview and a commentary on the current state and future directions of research in second language learning. It begins by outlining the ways perceptions of the world influence research and teaching. It then explores the contexts in which one individual has explored learning in second languages. Then an opinion is provided of what is problematic in current research and pedagogy. This leads to a discussion of different ways of conducting research about the learning of second languages. Finally, overall opinions about language learning and issues related to the training of teachers are revealed. (Contains 40 references.) (KFT)

Research in second language learning: Current questions and future directions

Paper presented at the Applied Linguistics Association of Australia conference, University of Canberra, July 2001

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In this presentation, I will commence by outlining how our ways of knowing the world influence our research and teaching. Next I will outline the contexts in which I have been exploring learning in second languages. Then I will give two illustrations of what I believe to be problematic in research and pedagogy at the moment. This will lead into a discussion of different approaches to doing research into the classroom learning of second languages. I will conclude by outlining the findings about language learning that I have uncovered using one of these approaches, and issues related to the training of teachers for the varied contexts of second language learning and teaching.

I start with context. Why?

I believe that a consideration of context is of major importance in language research, as Hymes notes:

> one cannot simply take separate results from linguistics, psychology, sociology, ethnology, as given, and seek to correlate them....one needs to investigate directly the use of language in contexts of situation (1974, p. 3).

Context is an active, creative phenomenon. As explained by Berger and Luckmann, rather than experiencing context as "out there", an individual "simultaneously externalizes his own being into the social world and internalizes it as objective reality" (1966, p. 119).

Green and Wallat (1981, p. 176) take the definition further and describe contexts as "socially active entities constructed by the students and teachers as they engage in social interactions in the classroom to achieve specific instructional goals". They go on

to say that "context, defined in this manner does not equate with lesson" and that "research has shown that contexts shift for the participants within as well as across the boundaries of lessons" (Green & Wallat, 1981, p. 176).}

The particular context in which I have chosen to conduct much of my research over the last ten years is that of the language immersion classroom. I have been criticised by some for limiting my research to this context, but my contention is this – I am interested in exploring the processes of language acquisition, so where better to commence this exploration than in a context where acquisition has consistently been shown to occur. Why try to investigate language acquisition in a context where acquisition risks not happening?

The immersion context is distinctive in Australia in the following ways:

- Programs are not dominated by one language, e.g. French in Canada or Spanish in the United States
- Children are immersed in a great variety of languages – French, German, Chinese etc etc
- There are no total immersion programs
- Different reasons have been put forward for the setting up of programs
  Some to learn language of community, some to reach out to the world
- Some programs are compulsory
- Some involve less than 50% of a child's school day or week.

On the handout I have provided two vignettes of the two classrooms in which I gathered the data for my forthcoming book on learners' experiences of immersion education (de Courcy, 2002). In the book I used these to provide a context for the discussion of my findings – here I will use them to provide a context for my discussion of research orientations.

If we look at the lessons we see information about the language used, activities done, some words copied down verbatim, observations of student behaviour and so on. You will probably already have recognised these as ethnographic field observation notes,

which will provide a clue to the orientation I used for the book, and for the direction in which this talk will move.

As researchers and teachers, we work within particular orientations, related to themes or paradigms. Habermas, in *Knowledge and human interest,* defined three themes -- the empirical-analytical, the situation-interpretive and the critical-reflective. Jacknicke & Rowell state that, "knowledge cannot be separated from human interests, and therefore the underlying assumptions which we hold determine how we come to know the world" (1987, pp. 62-63).

In 1979, Aoki applied Habermas' themes to understanding the orientations of educational theory.

The first orientation (empirical-analytical) is concerned with objectively determining how things work and predicting what will occur. Knowledge is seen as quantifiable and data collection involves control of events and subjects. Teaching is influenced by behaviorist notions of input, stimulus and environment.

The second orientation (situational-interpretive) is concerned with understanding events as they are, describing meanings in context, and with gaining insights into human experience. Research involves dealing with the "participants" (rather than "subjects") in the research in the context of their daily lives. Research in this orientation does not usually seek to evaluate, predict or change the situation being researched.

The third orientation (critical-reflective) is usually concerned with individuals and small groups and seeks to find how they create their own meaning system. In this paradigm the distinction between the researched and the researchers is often blurred and the aim of critical inquiry is to uncover hidden meaning. The lives and situations of the participants may change while the research is being conducted.

Like knowledge, the field of Second Language Acquisition is not a monolithic entity – it has many contexts, and the questions asked by researchers and teachers will be influenced by the contexts in which they work. As Gary Larson notes in one of his cartoons, it all depends on how you look at it.

What about the way research is conducted into second language learning – and, more significantly, the type of research that is published in major journals?

Recently, Anne Lazaraton conducted a survey of articles published in the four major US journals which deal with second language acquisition – TESOL Quarterly, Studies in Second Language Acquisition, Language Learning and the Modern Language Journal. Lazaraton (2000) found that of 332 data-based articles published in 4 US journals:

292 (88%) were "quantitative",

33 (10%) were "qualitative",

7(2%) were "partially qualitative".

The only journal surveyed which seems to publish non-statistical studies is TESOL Quarterly, where she found 38% of the research articles were "qualitative". And if TESOL quarterly were removed from the equation, the dominance of statistical articles would be even stronger

- Language Learning – 97% quantitative
- MLJ – 93% quantitative
- SSLA – 92% quantitative

Once again, we see the 'othering' of alternative orientations, a classification into either "quantitative" or "qualitiative" and the continuing dominance in the major US journals of the dominant paradigm.

Lazaraton (2000, p. 175) notes that the "sharp increase in the number of quantitative articles in both *TESOL Quarterly* and *Language Learning* from 1970 to 1985" was seen at the time as "a positive development – a kind of coming of age of a discipline".

•But, as Elaine Tarone notes in the Cumming article (1994, p. 676), "Researchers typically agree ... that both qualitative and quantitative methodologies are essential to the accurate description and analsysis of learner language" but that the empirical-analytical paradigm has been overdominant. In the same article in TESOL Quarterly, Alastair Pennycook notes that the "lack of published work [in critical pedagogical research in education] reflects not so much a paucity of critical work ... but rather the difficulty of getting such work published." (1994, p. 691) Fortunately, there is a growing number of journals, published in the main outside the US, through which those of us who work in

languages other than English, and in "alternative" paradigms, can share our work with other language professionals.

I believe that

- SLA researchers can learn from other disciplines
- The qualitative/quantitative distinction is too simplistic
- The discipline has been working in a hall of mirrors to some extent – not benefiting from the alternative orientations taken in, say literacy education.

The paradigms I spoke of at the beginning of this talk are applied to knowledge and research in general. I'd like to turn more specifically to research conducted in second language classrooms.

Most of the currently available literature on the learning of second languages takes one of two views of the language classroom: most imply a view of the classroom as "laboratory". Breen feels that this metaphor of the classroom "implies the teacher as surrogate experimental psychologist and learners as subject to particular input treatments or behavioral reinforcement" (1985, p. 137). In this model will be found experiments conducted in an artificial laboratory setting as well as in "the classroom as laboratory". A recent example from TESOL Quarterly is "Does output promote noticing and second language acquisition?" (Izumi and Bigelow, 2000).

Breen believes that "the metaphor of the classroom as provider of optimal input or reinforcer of good strategies [that is, the classroom as laboratory] is inadequate. It reduces the act or experience of learning a language to linguistic or behavioural conditioning somehow independent of the learner's social reality". (1985, p. 138)

A smaller number of studies, also often using statistical methods, see the classroom as "discourse". If using this metaphor of the classroom, "the researcher explores the classroom as a text" (Breen, 1985, p. 139). Features of the interactions between learners and teachers, such as error correction, question types and student participation are examined. Much of the research based on this metaphor uses an observation scheme to note down teacher and student 'moves" such as the classic "IRF" move of Sinclair and Coulthard. The tendency is for the number of different types of

moves to be quantified in some way, and for judgments about the classroom to be based on this analysis.

A recent example from the *Canadian Modern Language Review* is "Multidimensional project-based second language teaching: Observations of four grade 9 core French teachers" (Turnbull, 1999).

Kumaravadivelu (1999, p. 455) notes that the "theoretical foundation governing classroom interaction analysis can be traced to behavioristic psychology, which emphasises the objective analysis of observable behavior".

The metaphor of the classroom as discourse is also seen as having limitations because "most current classroom-oriented research paradoxically reduces the external dimensions of classroom communication, the actual social event, to observable features of the talk between teachers and learners" (Breen, 1985, p. 140). I contend that these directly observable features of talk in the classroom provide only a partial view of the learning process

Breen states that both of the metaphors of the classroom situation which I have just described "seem to neglect the social reality of language as it is experienced and created by teachers and learners" (1985, p. 141). He claims that we need a definition of the classroom that will "encompass both cognitive and social variables" (1985, p. 141). He proposes that researchers should base their explorations into language learning in classrooms on a view of "the classroom as coral gardens". Interest in Breen's "coral gardens" metaphor, which I used as the conceptual framework for my book, is similar in spirit to the ideas of Kumaravadivelu in his 1999 article on "critical classroom discourse analysis" and Leo van Lier's recent work on ecological orientations.

This view of the classroom asserts a number of propositions about research in language classrooms. I will outline the propositions and detail the aspects of language learning I have been able to uncover by taking this view of the language classroom:

1. The researcher cannot assume that the patterns of interactions which seem significant for an outsider have the same significance for the participants (Breen, 1985). . An example of this was found in the Chinese lesson, where my perception was that the

Chinese teacher was teaching content, but the students' perception was that the focus was on vocabulary and grammar.

2. Each learner responds differently to the situation: "although the language class may be one social situation, it is a different social context for all those who participate in it" (Breen, 1985, p. 144). This can be seen in the individual case studies presented in my book. Although each of the four learners from each setting was in the same class, with the same teachers, following the same program, their responses to the situation, and the strategies they adopted, were quite varied

3. The psyche or personality of the group is more than the sum of all the members of the group. A group can almost take on a "personality" of its own, which may differ from the personalities of individual group members (Breen, 1985; de Courcy, 1992). This was again particularly evident in the Chinese immersion group – which developed a reputation as a 'difficult', 'demanding' group, even though individual members did not fit this stereotype.

4. Participation in the language classroom involves the individual participants being evaluated against certain criteria, overt and covert, group and individual (Breen, 1985). This was revealed in the French immersion group, where members of the class were continually evaluating one another in terms of pronunciation, structure and so on. One's membership of that group was also important, with only one student moving outside the group to establish friendships with some "other cooler blokes". It is also seen in the Chinese group, with the informants evaluating other students' use of particular learning strategies against what they had been told "good language learners" did.

5. Within the class, there are various sub-groups which express different roles and identities (Breen, 1985). These may be defined by such things as gender, out-of-class interests or language proficiency. In the Chinese group, there was the "Wuhan group" and the "Shanghai group", which felt their identities quite strongly, even though, as stated earlier, to an outside observer, their proficiencies did not separate them into the same

groups. Perception, and identification with the experiences that were shared in the two different cities, were important to the students.

6. There are rules and routines which must be followed by participants in the class, and each new class "reinvents" these rules and constructs new routines (Breen, 1985; Tardif & Weber, 1987; de Courcy, 1992). One "rule" which was consistent across the two groups was that the teacher must speak in the new language and not code switch. Students were "allowed" to use English to answer a question, but the teacher's job was to move them back into the new language, "bridging" between the first and second languages. Students were highly critical of teachers who broke this rule.

7. The culture of the classroom is jointly constructed: Breen says that "What someone learns in a classroom will be a dynamic synthesis of individual and collective experience" (Breen, 1985, p. 148). According to Tardif and Weber, "making sense of what is going on in the classroom is often very much a collective process" (Tardif & Weber, 1987, p. 4). And van Lier holds that the "verbal interaction shapes the context and is shaped by it." (van Lier, 1988, p. 47) This will be seen in Chapter Three of my book, where the learners' responses to the learning context were discussed. The importance of one's fellow students to language learning was emphasised, both in terms of cooperation to aid understanding in the classroom itself, and in the help students gave to one another outside the classroom to complete assignments.

8. What can be overtly observed is a reduction of classroom reality: Breen states that "How things are done and why things are done have particular psychological significance for the individual and the group" (Breen, 1985, p. 149). Had I relied on observation data alone, and not asked the learners about what was going on, I would have obtained only a partial picture of how they learned in immersion classrooms.

What did I find through taking this orientation to explore classroom language learning? Firstly, I found that there is more to the acquisition of a second language in an

immersion situation than mere exposure to hours and hours of comprehensible input. The role of comprehensible in put is an important one, but it is not the whole story.

Students do not merely passively receive input, and thereby acquire the language. Listening, which dominates the immersion experience, as well as reading, involve the mental scanning of the input for known words and concepts, in order to make sense of the new, unknown words. A constant internal conversation, in the students' first and second languages, goes on while they are listening and reading. If, for whatever reason, the students are not actively involved in this processing of input, there is less likelihood of acquisition of the language. Merely being exposed to input is not being actively engaged with the spoken or written text.

The studies I have conducted in language classrooms (de Courcy, 1992b, 1993) have revealed that the use of private speech in the acquisition of a second language is not the preserve of child language learners. Even for adolescents and adults, internalised speech plays a crucial role in language acquisition. It is in this turning inwards that students start to make sense of the new language; the internalising is a signal that they are starting to make sense of the world through the new language; it becomes part of their way of being in the world. This internal speech as reported by the students is much more than rehearsal, or practicing form. The students talk to themselves about whatever activity they are engaged in; they create new sentences and tell jokes to themselves. Is this 'language play', as Lantolf suggested in his article in Language Teaching last year (Lantolf, 2000), a necessary condition for successful second language learning?

So we have active engagement with input, we have language play, and the other significant experience involves output. It seems to be in the production of output, after making sense of input by using the internal mode, that these students feel that their acquisition of the second language happens. The students in these immersion programs do not feel that they have acquired any part of the language until they have had the opportunity to use it in a real, communicative situation. When they can make somebody else understand them, then they know that they know.

The final factor that seems to enhance language acquisition in these immersion programs is the effect on the students' learning of the tight social groups that they form. They do not seem to learn the new language individually, but cooperate with one another

in order for the whole class to become proficient in the target language. This collaborative learning pattern may be the key to the students' success in becoming bilingual in the relatively short time they spend in late immersion programs.

Particularly related to private speech and collaboration with peers is the relatively new field of sociocultural theory and second language acquisition. This field draws upon the theories of Vygotsky, and Lantolf, one of its pioneers, noted in his 2000 article that "not only does our mental activity determine the nature of our social world, but this world of human relationships and artifacts also determines to a large extent how we regulate our mental processes" (Lantolf, 2000, p. 79) Lantolf notes that "only sociocultural theory incorporates mediation as a core construct in its theorising about language learning" (2000, p. 79). Our learning of language is MEDIATED by tools and words. We take it for granted that we use language to learn about science, but what do we use to learn about language?

Some questions that I am currently exploring using this framework:

1) *What stategies do students use when they solve problems written in the L2 in the immersion science classroom?* My co-researcher, Bernard Laplante and I will draw here on recent work conducted by Cohen and Scott (1996) and de Courcy and Burston (2000).

A sub question we will investigate is, what is the role of private speech in language learning, in particular what is the role of language play?

What is the role of cooperation with peers in the solving of reading and writing tasks? Merrill Swain and her colleagues (1998; Kowal & Swain, 1997) have been investigating the role of cooperative learning in French immersion programs in Canada) and my colleagues and I (1995) have been exploring this issue in Australia. Merrill Swain (1998) has recently concluded, that, rather than the cooperation merely aiding learning, the languageing between peers is where the learning takes place. During previous classroom observations, my colleague Monique Burston and I have observed how pairs of students work together to attempt to solve the word problems

they are presented with in Maths and Bernard and I propose to explore this in a more systematic way in the science classroom. How do students in content-based second language programs use one another in their attempts to make sense of unfamiliar text? What is the role of the more expert students in helping their peers in the Zone of Proximal Development? (Cummins, 1994; Laplante, 1997; Donato & Lantolf, 1990; Lantolf, 2000)

2) *In what language (L1 or L2) are the students thinking* when their minds proceed through the cognitive steps involved in finding a solution to maths and science word problems written in a second language? In 1993 I found a significant role for private speech in the process of learning in French immersion programs and Cohen (1994) considers this issue in relation to Spanish L2 in the United States. Anton & DiCamilla (1998) and Wells (1998) have been particularly interested in, not only the roles of L1 and L2, but also in the role of cooperation in the production of written tasks. Lantolf (2000, p. 88) also notes that "this is an area in which a good deal of worthwhile research can be undertaken".

Turning to pedagogy

It is traditional in ESL contexts to conduct a needs analysis of one's learners at the beginning of any course. For the last three years I have surveyed my DipEd students, at the start of my elective "TESOL Secondary". These are some typical concerns:

•To broaden my knowledge about ESL students in the classroom and the problems they face in Australian schools

•To become aware of the issues in teaching English to students who speak another language.

•For my own learning – an alternate "set of glasses" with which to view education in general, and the world, western or not.

•I would like to both understand the needs of the student and also maybe to Anglo students indicate that there are many benefits to Multilingual schools

•How the principles of learning ESL may be utilised with children having learning/literacy problems

I also surveyed my students in ESL acquisition theory. This year, many of the students came from Botswana.
And teachers from Botswana ask:

•Does the environment (and culture) have any impact in SLA?

•What is the best way of acquiring L2? / best method of teaching?

•What is the role of formal teaching of grammar?

•How can we use the research into SLA as teachers?

•What is the natural route and what does it mean?

•Influence on SLA of:

- Gender
- Intelligence
- L1

•Why is it so difficult?

I believe that to prepare teachers for the sorts of classrooms they may teach in, that

language teachers need:

- Empathy through direct experience of second language learning and reflection on that experience;
- An understanding of bilingualism

•*leading to*

- Support for first languages
- New pedagogical strategies

As Pennycook (1995, p. 311) says, we need

– "a pedagogy that starts with the concerns of the students, … an exploration of students' histories and cultural locations, of the limitations and possibilities presented by languages and discourses."

In my teaching of literacy education, I have become acquainted with the new field of critical literacy, and feel that there could be a valuable cross fertilisation to the second language area. A cross fertilisation of approaches from L1 literacy education could help our students become:

•Not just code breaker,

– *How do I crack this?* but

•Text participant (or 'meaning maker')- *What does this mean?*

•Text user - *What do I do with this?* and

•Text analyst - *What does this do to me?*

Although I was unable to attend TESOL this year, I noted that the closing panel of TESOL 2001 identified 4 key areas:

– EFL in primary schools
– Bilingual education and ESOL instruction
– Teacher preparation
-- Research

I propose that these issues will be best explored by using critical classroom discourse analysis or sociocultural theory to explore learning in the classroom as coral gardens.

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Handout
Research in second language learning: Current questions and future directions
Michèle de Courcy

CONTEXTS
These vignettes of immersion classrooms come from Chapter 3 of de Courcy (in press).

The Chinese immersion classroom

This lesson will be presented here as an example of the type of interaction observed in the Chinese immersion classroom. The lesson was in the "Sociocultural discussion" section of the "Applied Linguistics and Materials Development" course and dealt with the period of Chinese history when Kublai Khan was ruler.

> The lesson began with the teacher outlining what they would do that day, writing characters on the board as he did so. Once the students perceived that he was dealing with racial groups in China they started to call out suggestions of other groups the teacher might write up on the board.
>
> Many times during the lesson, the students (and the observer!) became totally lost with the teacher's explanation and he resolved the communication breakdown by using English. For example, after a lengthy explanation in Chinese about the Mongolian people, he gave up and explained in English that he was describing a tent and a way of travelling which was like a caravan.
>
> During his explanations in Chinese, when the teacher uses a new word, he writes the character(s) on the board, and provides an English translation of the word. About half way through the lesson, the following exchange was overheard between two students sitting together:
>
> > Student 1: [holds her head and asks] Who are they killing?
> > Student 1: [turns to Student 2] Do you understand?
> > Student 2: I stopped listening a couple of minutes ago.
>
> The teacher then translated what he had been saying into English. Then he went back into Chinese to continue telling the story. Occasionally a student would repeat a phrase the teacher said. The teacher would then translate the phrase into English. At other times the teacher would repeat a word twice, and if the students shook their heads he would translate the word into English. When the teacher stopped talking the students discussed in English what he might have been trying to convey:
>
> > Is it like nine heads? or is it that Kublai Khan had nine sons and these are like the nine minorities?
>
> The lesson continued in this manner, with the students largely passive, listening and trying to understand the thread of the lesson. When students were obviously not understanding, the teacher would translate into English. The only teaching

aids used were a map of China, to which the teacher would occasionally point, and the whiteboard on which characters were written.

The French immersion classroom

This Science lesson was noted by the students, researcher and teacher as being fairly typical of their lessons throughout the year. This lesson was the last lesson of the day and will be described in detail here.

The topic of the lesson was a synthesis of the digestive system and the circulatory system, both of which topics had been recently covered separately. The teacher began the lesson by explaining the purpose of it and the word "synthèse" (synthesis) , which was new. She said:

On va faire un synthèse - vous devez mettre les deux systèmes ensemble.
[We're going to do a synthesis - you have to put the two systems together]

The teacher then began drawing up the following table (Figure 3.1) on the blackboard. The table was from the students' Science booklets.

Figure 3.1 ACTIVITE 15: TABLEAU RECAPITULATIF - SYSTEME CIRCULATOIRE
Complétez le tableau ci-dessous:

Qu'est-ce qui est transporté?	A partir d'où?	Jusqu'où?	Transporté comment?
l'oxygène	des alvéoles dans les poumons		
le dioxyde de carbon			
les nutriments			
les déchets - l'urine	du foie		
les hormones			
la chaleur			

During the Science lesson observed, the teacher spent the first half of the lesson on revision of previous work, using the table above, reproduced on the blackboard. The teacher would ask a question related to the table, and then nominate a particular student to provide the answer. Occasionally she would allow students to raise their hands to bid for the chance to give the answer. The discourse in this section of the lesson involved long, complex sentences from the teacher, with short, one or two word (minimal) answers from the students. The teacher asked the students twice to cease writing - they would be given five minutes to copy down the answers when the revision session was ended. The teacher explained to the researcher that she insists on the students not writing so that they will listen and concentrate on the lesson.

Once during this section a question prompted a student to answer at some length. During this question and answer session, students would turn to their neighbour or turn around in their seats to ask for help with providing the answer, whether they were nominated or not. Sometimes students will raise their hands to volunteer an answer after consultation, sometimes not.

This section of the lesson ended with the teacher allowing the students time to copy the completed table into their notebooks. The students spent about five minutes writing quietly. The teacher moved around the room, saying a word here or there to the students, being jokingly severe with one boy, helpful to others.

When most students were finished, she signalled the end of this part of the lesson by directing the students to close their notebooks and their Science books. They were going to start a new section about respiration. She first explained that in English there was only one word for the two concepts involved in «respiration» - «en anglais, on a 'breathing'» ["in English, you have 'breathing'"] . This was the only use of an English word by the teacher in the whole lesson. She translates only rarely, and only when she wants to make a specific point like this. At this point she had to interrupt her explanation to send one students outside to pick up papers - he had been disturbing those around him.

Then the teacher returned to the topic at hand. The questioning pattern here was different from that in the earlier revision session -- here, the teacher would ask an open-ended question, such as «pourquoi est-ce qu'on inspire et expire?» ["why do we breathe in and out?"]. These open-ended questions called for much longer answers from the students.

After this introduction, the teacher then turned to the board and started to draw diagrams and explanations on the board, still questioning and explaining while she drew. This section returns to the earlier pattern of short questions and answers as before. This was the most common pattern observed in lessons at this school over the years.

Then the students copy down the notes, diagrams and homework task from the board, fairly quietly, concentrating on the task. At 3 pm the students started to pack up their things. There are no bells at this school; students are expected to be responsible for keeping track of the time. As the students get ready to leave, they joke in French about the horrible smell that has been wafting over from the nearby sports oval, where organic fertiliser has been spread. They are able to accurately describe the fertiliser (la merde de poules) and its smell in French and take great delight in doing so!

In summary, a typical lesson consists of revision of previous work, introduction of new work, a task based on the new work, and setting of homework.

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