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Rebekah Rast, Christine Dimroth, Marzena Watorek

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Language teaching and acquisition : What can we learn from *ab initio* learners ?

Introduction

Research studies conducted in the closely related and ultimately interdependent domains of foreign language pedagogy and second language acquisition have generally developed independently of one another in spite of numerous parallels. This article identifies some of the reasons for this divergence and argues that convergence is now necessary in order to properly investigate a number of increasingly urgent questions about the teaching and learning of foreign languages. Work at the interface between research in language acquisition and pedagogy is particularly essential for the advancement of practices of language teaching, enhancing language curricula, and making informed decisions about language policies affecting foreign language and multilingual education in today's schools. This article describes an innovative research program that involves, and ultimately requires, collaboration between language teachers and specialists in foreign language pedagogy and foreign language acquisition. The program implicates language educators and acquisition specialists in a study of the very first stages of instructed foreign language acquisition under controlled input conditions, a collaboration that is necessary for both theoretical and practical purposes.

The language educator and the linguist/acquisition specialist

Language professionals have been calling for collaboration between specialists in linguistics, foreign/second language acquisition (henceforth FLA) and foreign language pedagogy (henceforth FLP)¹ for decades (e.g.

1. We have opted for the term *foreign language* as opposed to *second language* here for a logical inclusion of all non-native languages regardless of whether the language is the

Martinot 2005; Rast & Taïeb 2008; Véronique 2000). In a special Georgetown University Round Table publication devoted⁹ to linguistics and language pedagogy, Van Lier (1991, p. 528) argued the need for closer collaboration between the fields of linguistics and education in particular :

[...] my thesis is that it makes sense, for a number of reasons, for linguists to become more actively involved in education, and for educators to study linguistics. In this way, a fruitful link between theoretical and applied concerns in linguistics can be re-established.

Van Lier reasons that such collaboration would lead to a better understanding of, among other areas, the role of consciousness, awareness, implicit/explicit learning, attention, intake, and input in language learning. In the same volume, Flynn (1991) writes, « Central to this paper is the belief that a dialogue between linguistic theorists and language pedagogues must be established [...] Linguists need language teachers and language teachers need linguists » (p. 548). Flynn, emphasizing the importance of theory for not only linguists but also language educators, argues that without some sort of theory as the basis for curriculum development, coherent teaching is unlikely. Teachers certainly use theories, according to Flynn, but she questions whether these theories are the appropriate ones. She offers an example of the difference between Japanese and English with regard to head-direction (e.g. English has verb-object constructions; Japanese has object-verb constructions), suggesting that if an educator understands this difference, the teaching of English to Japanese speakers (or vice versa) will be facilitated.

Flynn's reference is to a specific theory of linguistics, that of Universal Grammar (UG) (e.g. Chomsky 1986). From the perspective of FLP, one of the problems with applying UG theorizing to teaching is that linguists working within this framework tend to analyze sentences out of context in search of universals of syntactic structure. For decades, language educators have done just the opposite; they tend to teach language within a context. UG-theory based research results in large quantities of data from languages around the world based on awkward sentences that are unlikely to be produced by native speakers, such as Chomsky's (1957, p. 15) infamous sentence, « Colorless green ideas sleep furiously ». Chomsky and his

second, third, fourth, etc. (see Hammarberg 2010 for a discussion about this terminology).

colleagues have sound reasons for studying such constructions with respect to the theory of UG ; however, such linguistic analysis remains exterior to the classroom domain and, understandably, remote to the language educator.

Roulet (1994, p. 16) highlights the limitations of such a theory for language teaching :

De fait, la didactique du français langue seconde est surtout marquée, dans les années soixante-dix, par le développement d'une approche communicative [...]. Mais les appuis théoriques et descriptifs que la didactique peut trouver dans les sciences du langage sont limités dans la mesure où les chercheurs d'alors travaillaient presque exclusivement sur des exemples fabriqués et isolés².

This is not to say that the research conducted from a UG perspective is not useful to language educators, but rather, that much of the work is not accessible or meaningful to educators. Flynn makes a valiant effort at « debunking the myths » ; however, the recurring isolated and awkward sentences continue to appear in the literature, along with scientific jargon that is not easily permeable. Roulet, in fact, articulated, and rightly so, one of the principle reasons for the lack of collaboration between linguists and educators: they have two distinct ways of collecting and analyzing language data.

Returning to the question of whether or not pedagogy needs a theory, Carlo, (2000 p. 440) takes a similar stance to that of Flynn, but not one that is UG-based. She argues that FLP should be based on the research that is conducted essentially in instructional settings and that stems from diverse scientific domains, such as the linguistics of interlanguage, the psycholinguistics of language appropriation processes, and the ethno-linguistics of in-class verbal interactions :

En bref, elle [DDL, didactique des langues] devrait reposer sur une théorie intégrative de l'acquisition, issue des résultats de différentes sciences

2. "In fact, French as a Second Language pedagogy in the 70s was marked in particular by the development of the Communicative Approach [...]. But there is a limit to the theoretical and descriptive support that pedagogy can find in the field of linguistics in that researchers at the time worked almost exclusively on fabricated and isolated examples".

fondamentales, focalisés autour d'un même objet de recherche. Or, cette théorie, qu'il ne lui appartient pas d'élaborer, est à venir³.

Although the primary responsibility of educators is not to develop such a theory, educators can play a crucial role in not only developing research questions and hypotheses, but also collecting and analyzing data.

Many linguists and educators have recognized the need to study the actual productions of both learners and native speakers (as opposed to the fabricated productions of the « idéal » native speaker) to access information about the underlying processes of language learning. Perdue (1981), for example, argued for the observation of language in the classroom. For Perdue, understanding instructed learning requires a close look at specific classroom activities, while asking a number of questions, such as : What abilities or skills are students prompted to use in the classroom (perceptual, memorial, comprehension, written and verbal production, etc.) and why ? What information can a particular classroom activity contribute to the L2 learner's knowledge stores? What is the time lag between the given activity and 'natural' language activity?

A series of research programs, some coordinated by linguists, others coordinated by educators, have used the classroom for fieldwork. Such programs include action research (cf. Burns 1999; Nunan 1989), which has a long history (cf. Crookes 1993 for an overview), Focus on Form research (cf. Doughty & Williams 1998 ; Lyster 2004), the use of metalanguage (cf. Cicurel 1985 ; Basturkmen et al. 2002), Processing Instruction (cf. VanPatten 1996), Processability Theory (Pienemann 1998), corrective feedback (cf. Russell & Spada 2006 for an overview) and interaction research (cf. Gass 1997 ; Long 1980 ; Moirand 1994 ; Pekarek Doehler 2000 ; Carlo 2000). In spite of the variety of approaches to studying language learning and teaching, linguists and educators tend to maintain separate research agendas. This could be explained in part by the fact that these experts differ in both their approach to the study of language and their objectives (cf. the contributions in Klein & Dimroth,

3. « In short, FLP should be supported by an integrative theory of acquisition based on findings from various fundamental sciences that focus on a same research object. In fact, this theory, which is not up to FLP to develop, has yet to appear ».

2009). Generally, FLP seeks to intervene in the acquisition/learning⁴ process by means of teaching in order to assist learners in developing the structures and processes necessary for understanding and speaking a new target language (TL)⁵. FLA, on the other hand, aims to describe, interpret and explain the construction of linguistic competence in a TL. Research questions often overlap given their common interest: the foreign language learner. Generally, however, differences in methodology, approaches to data analysis, and theoretical interpretation hinder collaboration. Roulet (1994: 20) also points out that the educators' dilemma is often more pressing in that they are confronted with immediate student needs:

Ceux-ci [didacticiens] ne peuvent attendre la mise au point d'un modèle multi-dimensionnel par les spécialistes des sciences du langage pour se mettre à l'ouvrage dans ce domaine. Tout d'abord, ils risquent d'attendre longtemps, et ils ne peuvent pas attendre, car les besoins des apprenants sont insistants⁶.

Chaudron (1991: 56) acknowledges that research results in FLA have not always been applicable to teaching:

[...] I must call attention to the need for researchers to provide sufficient evidence for their eventual claims as to the nature and effects of instruction. The history of research on L2 instruction, going back to the "methods comparison" research of the 1960's, is littered with studies that have failed in one way or another to document the actual language teaching events in the programs or methods they were comparing.

It is important to point out, however, that not all research in pedagogy and acquisition can or should involve collaboration between the two domains; some questions will remain specific to the expertise. However, if the objective is to understand not only the complex processes involved in acquiring a new language, but also the impact that teaching can have on

4. The terms "learning" and "acquisition" are used interchangeably in this article. The distinction between the generally understood instructed and conscious "learning" versus the natural and unconscious "acquisition" (cf. Krashen 1981) remains an area of investigation for the current project.
5. We favor the term "target language (TL)" over "second language (L2)" here because TL, like foreign language, is more inclusive and encompasses all languages learned including and beyond the L2, often referred to as "additional languages" or "L3 acquisition" (cf. De Angelis 2007).
6. "Those in pedagogy cannot wait for linguists to develop a multi-dimensional model before they begin working. First and foremost, they risk waiting for a long time, and they cannot wait because the learners' needs are pressing".

these processes, a combined effort is worthwhile. Thus, a more precise description of the relation between the teaching event, the language(s) used in this teaching event (linguistic input) and the learners' performance with regard to the event and the linguistic input is needed. As Janitza (1990 : 45) points out,

L'une des caractéristiques de l'apprentissage en milieu institutionnel est la faiblesse en quantité et en qualité de l'« input », c'est-à-dire de l'exposition à la langue étrangère, ainsi d'ailleurs que la faiblesse en quantité et en qualité de l'« output », c'est-à-dire de l'activité langagière « productive »⁷.

Empirical questions naturally follow: What influence does the linguistic input have on language acquisition? Do more possibilities for productive output enhance the language acquisition experience? Roulet (1994: 21) closes his paper with a clear and firm suggestion for linguists and educators alike:

Mais, pour le didacticien comme pour le linguiste, il importe [...] d'éviter le cloisonnement des approches et la parcellisation des connaissances. Pour cela, il convient de ne pas perdre de vue ces deux objectifs fondamentaux à long terme que sont, d'une part, la constitution d'un cadre de référence global permettant d'intégrer tous les aspects du discours et, d'autre part, la découverte des généralisations nécessaires à toute description et à tout apprentissage⁸.

This section has focused on reasons for the lack of convergence between research conducted in the two related areas of FLP and FLA. In what follows, we argue the need for collaboration between specialists in these two domains within one and the same research program, investigating the same research questions with the same learners in the same setting. Such collaboration is necessary for the advancement of theories of TL learning and for the continued enhancement of classroom

7. « One of the characteristics of institutional learning is the weakness in quantity and quality of 'input', i.e. exposure to the foreign language, as well as the weakness in quantity and quality of 'output', i.e. 'productive' language activity ».
8. « But, for both the pedagogue and the linguist, what is important [...] is to avoid the compartmentalization of approaches and the parceling out of knowledge. In order to do this, we must not lose sight of two fundamental long-term objectives: on one hand, the constitution of a global frame of reference that allows for the integration of all aspects of discourse, and on the other hand, the discovery of generalizations that are necessary for all descriptions and all Learning ».

procedures for effective language teaching. Borrowing from Roulet, we need to construct a « global frame of reference ».

Acquisition-teaching collaborative research paradigm

This section describes a research program (cf. Dimroth et al. 2010) that is dependent on elaborate and regular collaboration between specialists in both FLP and FLA. The program, « Varieties of Initial Learners in Language Acquisition » (VILLA), sets out to investigate the very first stages of instructed FLA under controlled input conditions. The result will be an empirical study of rigorously prepared and controlled linguistic input that will contribute significantly to current debates in language acquisition research, such as the second language (L2) initial state, the acquisition-teaching interface, third language (L3) acquisition, the age factor, and the effect of different types of exposure on performance. The principal theoretical objective is to gain new insights into the structure and dynamics of elementary learner language varieties within a context where the learners' linguistic input can be thoroughly scrutinized and used as a point of reference for analysis of the receptive and productive knowledge that has been acquired. The principal applied objective is to contribute to reflections on how language teachers can optimize classroom time and enhance their students' experience of appropriating a new TL, and on how to best assess their students' language proficiency and development. We begin with research questions posed within such a program that should be of interest to both FLP and FLA.

Rather than presenting research concerns from theoretical and practical perspectives respectively, as is the usual format, let us look at specific research concerns from both perspectives simultaneously. One highly debated topic in FLA is the characterization of the initial state of an adult foreign language learner, better known as a « true beginner » in the FLP literature. From a UG-theory based perspective (cf. Schwartz & Sprouse 1996 ; White 2003), the L2 initial state is seen as the equivalent of the L1 final state. In other words, learners come to the acquisition process with their L1 fully intact and transfer their L1 knowledge to their L2. For instance, if their L1 shows object-verb constructions, they will initially treat their L2 as an object-verb language (as in Flynn's example of head-direction cited above).

Research conducted within a functionalist framework has shown, however, that even the most basic user of a foreign language produces utterances that cannot be explained by a direct appeal to the grammar of the L1 nor to that of the language being learned or used (cf. Klein & Perdue 1997). Starren (2006), for example, analyzed early productions of Turkish and Moroccan learners of Dutch or French as a TL and found that their use of adverbs was not always related to the way equivalent adverbs function in their L1 or the TLs. As Corder (1978) and Kellerman (1983) have argued, transfer is related to what the learner finds to be the most language neutral. Language transfer is, therefore, considered a complex and creative process conducted by individual language learners, based not only on knowledge of the L1 and TL, but also on properties which are independent of the L1 and TL.

Given these two distinct perspectives regarding the learner's initial state and the impressive attempts to support each of them, what is a language teacher to do when faced with a class of true beginners? Indeed, there is insufficient evidence for any claim about the L2 initial state in that few empirical studies have investigated the early stages of L2 learning. Such studies will need to control variables in the early stages with respect to questions such as the following :

1. What is a learner capable of perceiving, comprehending, and producing in a novel TL at first exposure and within the first hours that follow ?

Both educators and acquisition researchers also need to know more about the prior knowledge learners bring to the acquisition process, whether or not they are able to make use of this knowledge, and if so, under what conditions :

2. What is the role of a learner's L1 and other background languages⁹ at the early stages of acquisition ? What knowledge do beginning learners make use of, independent of their background languages, such as discourse principles, information structure, and extra-linguistic (world) knowledge to acquire a new language ?

9. The term « background languages » refers to all languages known to the learner, regardless of proficiency level, at the time of learning a new TL (cf. Hammarberg 2010).

In addition to learning more about beginning learners, a practical advantage to investigating learning at the early stages is that the TL input can be controlled and compared at selected time intervals with the learners' performance on TL tasks. In essence, the TL input, understood here as the teacher's TL productions and the students' TL interventions, can be studied and analyzed to see what effect it has on TL learning. Once students have had some exposure to the TL, it becomes more difficult to say anything about the role of the input. If input is not documented, it cannot be described, and therefore its influence on the learner's current TL state is dubious. In sum, another variable, prior linguistic input, is added to the already complex picture.

The role of the TL input in L2 learning has also become a highly debated topic. The precise properties of the input and their influence on L2 learning have been neglected in FLA studies for decades. This is the case primarily because of the dominance of the strong UG-theory based hypothesis discussed above, that the L2 initial state is the equivalent of an learner's L1 final state (cf. Schwartz & Sprouse 1996, White 2003). From this perspective, a learner's L1 is the basis for learning a new L2, and input does nothing more than trigger the language learning mechanism to reset parameters, that is, to shift from the original L1 structure to the new L2 structure. For instance, if one's L1 has the feature [+pro-drop] (subject pronouns can be dropped as in Spanish), the parameter [+pro-drop] is set. In the case of L1 English, the parameter [-pro-drop] (subject pronouns cannot be dropped) is set. An English learner of Spanish or vice versa will, therefore, need to reset the pro-drop parameter.

In the functionalist approach, input is viewed as a crucial element in L2 development. All necessary information is believed to be present in the input, and learners use their knowledge and cognitive capacities to analyse this input. Thus, the questions to ask are :

3. What do learners at the early stages do with the linguistic stimulus provided to them by the language instructor and/or their TL environment ? How do they first break into the TL speech stream to extract some sort of meaning ? What is the role of the linguistic input itself (e.g. frequency of items and features in the input) ? What paralinguistic cues (gestural, interaction, context) are more or less used by learners ?

In FLP, debates tend to focus on the methods, approaches and techniques underlying decisions about what TL features to introduce and teach, and how to teach them :

4. What are the effects of different types of presentation of similar TL properties ? For instance, do learners benefit more from explicit instruction of form or from an implicit approach to teaching form ? Do learners benefit more from instruction that makes use of the students' L1 (and/or another foreign language) or from instruction in the TL only ?

As mentioned earlier, few research projects have attempted to tackle the input problem because of the difficulty involved in controlling, measuring, coding and documenting the language environment of the learner. In some cases, artificial languages have been developed for this purpose (e.g. Hulstijn & DeKeyser 1997 ; Reber 1967; Saffran et al. 1996). Generally, experiments test the learners' performance in the novel language with respect to pre-selected features (phonological, morphological, syntactic or semantic) and relative to variables such as working memory, rule learning, generalization, knowledge representation, and other processing and cognitive functions. Although the findings of this type of research are often relevant to research in language acquisition and teaching, the limitations are clear in that artificial languages lack the complexity and variation found in natural languages.

The alternative is a close examination of the natural linguistic input to which learners are exposed. From an FLA perspective, Gullberg, Roberts, & Dimroth (in press), who studied Dutch native speakers exposed to seven minutes of Chinese input, found that a combination of item frequency and gestural highlighting helped word recognition and sound to meaning mapping. Rast (2008), working with French learners of Polish during the first 8 hours of exposure, showed that salience significantly helped learners perceive and comprehend items in the Polish input. Although these and a handful of other studies of this kind are informative, they have only scratched the surface in terms of our knowledge about the processes involved in language appropriation. More studies are needed in which the natural language input is controlled and documented, with a variety of L1 and TL combinations.

A similar lacuna exists in FLP literature where little research has been conducted on true beginners. One recent exception is a study by Winkler (2010) in which two groups of Italian L2 learners of German were exposed

to 60 hours of classroom teaching each. The input differed mainly in the order in which certain grammatical features were introduced. Winkler found that performance differed across groups, showing a clear effect of input type, or rather, of type of instruction on learner performance. Research conducted by language teachers in the classroom generally focuses less on the underlying processes involved in language learning, as Winkler's study did, and more on issues such as student perceptions, learning strategies, and intercultural communication. Bae (1999), for example, examined the relationship between foreign language learning and cultural correlates for beginning French learners of Korean in a French engineering school. Robinson (2001) investigated the beginning language student's self-concept (e.g. learning strategies), as well as the relationship between student and teacher perceptions of performance. Studies like these, as well as action research mentioned above, have culminated into a set of informative yet diverse studies that, as a whole, fail to provide clear indications to language teachers, in particular at the early stages of learning.

The need for the expertise of language teachers in such a collaborative foreign language-learning program is evident. Appropriate teaching materials need to be designed with respect to research questions and hypotheses, and they need to be tested in the classroom. Different presentations of the same material for comparative purposes (e.g. implicit vs. explicit teaching) need to take place. Both the teaching and learning experiences need to be analyzed and documented. Admittedly, some of the research questions we pose here have been investigated to a certain extent in both FLP and FLA, but generally not at the early stages where the input can be controlled. Once we have a characterization of the L2 initial state, we can then move on to investigate how learners' language abilities develop over time, observing changes in learner performance with respect to the linguistic input received.

Conclusion

The research program presented here proposes to begin bridging the gap between the closely related and ultimately inter-dependent domains of language acquisition and teaching by attempting to better understand the processes underlying instructed TL acquisition in order to work out, in

collaboration with experts in FLP, how these processes can best be enhanced by language teaching. In order for such a paradigm to be functional, several practical matters must be considered:

5. Language educators need to be recognized as researchers in their own right. They need to be given the time and resources to conduct useful and productive research.
6. Teacher training programs need to incorporate linguistics/acquisition studies and applications for teaching so that teachers begin their careers with a solid knowledge base about how language and language learning work and how they can contribute to the development of language teaching methods, approaches and techniques.
7. Collaboration between educators and linguists/acquisition specialists needs to be facilitated. In order to construct a "global frame of reference", language experts must work together.

The results of such a program should lend themselves to both the theorization of current questions concerning FLA and a reflection on the practical implications of this empirical investigation for FLP. With regard to the theorization of results, they should inform the debate about the available initial state knowledge that learners can use when processing input upon first contact with a new language. With regard to the practical impact of this paradigm, results will contribute to discussions about the elaboration of methods used for teaching foreign languages. In other words, we wish to know firstly, what the learner actually does with the specific content of a language lesson, that is, the linguistic input of the instruction, and secondly, what effect the manner in which this linguistic input is presented has on the learner's performance. Debunking myths, avoiding the temptation to compartmentalize, constructing a general frame of reference, and discovering generalizations that are necessary for model/theory building underlie the more specific objectives of this language acquisition-teaching interface, a paradigm that is motivated by the idea that one must understand a process in order to enhance it.

Rebekah Rast
(The American University of Paris & CNRS-UMR 7023)
Christine Dimroth (Universität Osnabrück)
Marzena Watorek (Université Paris 8 & CNRS-UMR 7023)

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