Research Issues and Language Program Direction

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Editor

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RESEARCH DOMAINS
AND LANGUAGE PROGRAM DIRECTION

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Introduction

Perhaps no professional topic should be of greater concern to Language Program Directors (LPDs) than that of their role as scholars and researchers.[1] A number of questions suggest themselves, among which are: (1) what are the research domains that will best help an LPD set up a research agenda?, (2) how does the LPD integrate research into a professional position?, and (3) how does the LPD educate colleagues in literary studies such that they both understand and appreciate the research that the LPD does? None of these questions is more important than the others. They reflect problems faced by all tenure-track LPDs in departments dominated by literary and/or traditional linguistic studies. In the present article, I will address each of these questions in turn, offering at times descriptive observation of some points and critical discussion of others. I begin with research domains.

Research Domains

Three lists serve as a point of departure for a discussion of research domains for LPDs. The first is the list of invited colloquia for the 1997 meeting of the American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL). The second and third are the lists of invited plenary talks for the 1997 and 1998 Second Language Research Forum (SLRF). Both of these are important research-oriented conferences.

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Invited Colloquia for the A AAL 1997

1. Creole Linguistics and Social Responsibility
2. Incorporating Sociolinguistic Perspectives into SLA Theory
3. Language Policy and Planning: Sociopolitical Perspectives
4. Learning to Read in L2: A View from L1 Research
5. Sociocultural Theory and SLA: Confronting the Margins
6. The Nature of Communication in Foreign Language Classrooms

Invited Plenary Sessions for SLRF 1997

1. The Role of Attention in SLA: Point/Counterpoint
2. Features and Patterns in the Acquisition of Syntax
3. SLA and Theories of Mind from Four Perspectives

Invited Plenary Sessions for SLRF 1998

1. Exploring the "Interlanguage" of "Interlanguage Pragmatics"
2. Instructed SLA: A Cognitivist Account
3. Connectionist Models of Lexical Acquisition
4. Parametric Change in Language Development: Psycholinguistic and Historical Perspectives on SLA
5. (General) Nativism and Second Language Development

What is clear from these lists is that in order to be an applied linguist in the second language context (rather than in the first language context), one must contribute to some area of inquiry relevant to the acquisition and use of nonnative languages. The colloquia and plenaries are suggestive of the current multifaceted and interdisciplinary nature of second language acquisition (SLA), and, building on these presentations, we can outline the research that is presently moving the field of second language studies forward. There are five major areas of research, each in turn suggesting a number of sub-areas. (All citations are representative and are not intended to be exhaustive.)

1. The psycholinguistics of language acquisition and language use.
Under the rubric of psycholinguistics we find a number of important lines of inquiry. One such line explores the link between comprehension and

language acquisition, for example, input processing and the derivation of intake (VanPatten 1996). Indeed, the nature of comprehension (whether aural or written) has yielded a great deal of research and continues to do so. On the horizon as a significant research area is processing capacity and its relationship to attainment and individual differences (Just and Carpenter 1992). Another line of psycholinguistic research explores the development of output processing and the relationship between production and the internalization of language (Swain 1985, 1998). Among the important constructs currently under investigation are speech-processing constraints (Pienemann 1998) and the development of fluency (Schmidt 1992).

2. **The nature of interlanguage and the processes that govern it.** In the domain of interlanguage scholarship, we find research on accommodation and restructuring (i.e., how the brain organizes language once appropriate linguistic data have been accommodated into the learner's developing system), hypothesis formation, and the roles of both first language and Universal Grammar (Eubank 1991; Schwartz and Sprouse 1996; Selinker 1992; Towell and Hawkins 1994). Although it is true that the field has long been dominated by sentence-level research, research on discourse-level phenomena is appearing, especially concerning the construction of narratives and how learners use tense to construct such narratives (Bardovi-Harlig 1992, 1994). Interlanguage is no longer limited to grammatical form and structure; the importance of communication has led many researchers to examine the nature of pragmatic competence in second language learners (Kasper 1997). In addition, vocabulary acquisition is receiving increased interest among researchers (Coady and Huckin 1997).

3. **The sociocultural dimensions of second language acquisition and use.** Researchers in sociocultural aspects of second language acquisition and use are interested in how interactional patterns are involved in language acquisition. They investigate the nature and structure of these interactional patterns as well as possible effects they have on the internalization of language (Gass 1997). Basic, but not exclusive of other questions, is the following: who speaks to whom, when, about what, and with what purpose (Musumeci 1997)? Recently, Vygotskian approaches to second language acquisition and use are proving to offer critical insight into second language acquisition using constructs such as language as mediation and inner speech (Lantolf and Appel 1994).

4. The nature of input. A continued area of empirical inquiry is the nature of input, especially the quality and quantity of input received by learners (Gass and Madden 1985; Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991, Chapter 5). There is no language acquisition without input and we have yet to understand fully the nature of input in language classes. Further, when one examines the literature on input available during language acquisition, one is struck by the paucity of research on languages other than English (Chaudron 1988, Chapter 3; Gass 1997). Just what does the speech of teachers in Spanish, French, and German classes, for example, look like?

5. The effects of instruction. Ever since the birth of contemporary SLA studies, scholars have reflected on and empirically investigated the role of formal instruction in the development of the learner's linguistic system. The focus has been on whether or not formal instruction (i.e., instruction in grammatical form) is necessary, beneficial, or detrimental to SLA. Underlying this research is the more fundamental question: Can instruction alter the processes by which learners internalize language? We are far from satisfactorily answering this question. Moreover, the research paradigms used to investigate the effects of formal instruction have changed over the years and will no doubt continue to change as the problem is viewed from new perspectives. The bibliography on this topic is extensive (Doughty and Williams 1998; Eckman et al. 1995; Ellis 1990; Lightbown, Spada, and White 1993; Pienemann 1987; VanPatten 1996).

The above list of topics is partial; individual differences, affective variables, and other researched topics could easily be added as secondary areas of inquiry. Absent from the list is pedagogy. Understood as the creation of language teaching materials and the concern for the day-to-day matters of the classroom, pedagogy is not a research-oriented field (though it can be theory-driven in the sense that many involved in pedagogical concerns look to current theory and research for insights into language teaching).

Of concern to the present discussion is an issue that led to the present volume. Several years ago, at a business meeting of the AAUSC, there was some concern about how untenured LPDs might put together a research agenda for tenure, a research agenda that was possible within the context of language program direction. This concern is puzzling; research agendas should be determined during doctoral education, not only during the thesis stage but throughout the graduate program. Ideally a dissertation should contribute to one or both of the following areas: (1) knowledge

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advancement in a particular content domain and (2) research methodology. For a dissertation to do this, there are two fundamental questions that must be addressed when a dissertation proposal is defended. The first question is: Why conduct this research? (i.e., How is it important to the ongoing research of which it is presumably a part?) The purpose behind this question is to encourage novice researchers to understand how their particular work fits into a larger scholarly field. The second question to be addressed at the time of a proposal defense is: What do you do after this study is completed? The intent of this question is to get budding researchers to reflect on potential limitations of the study and to envision possible future studies. In asking—and answering—these questions, doctoral students should have thought about a research agenda before they move from graduate student status to independent academic.

One Example of a Research Agenda

Although we would want graduate education to help prospective LPDs set up a research agenda, there remains the fact that some LPDs are currently grappling with establishing a research agenda after receiving the Ph.D. What follows, then, is a personal example of how a research agenda emerges. The example is positivistic in nature, that is, it involves a quantitative and experimental framework. This does not mean, however, that the same processes involved in the creation of a research agenda do not apply equally for both quantitative and qualitative frameworks.

In 1996 I published a book called *Input Processing and Grammar Instruction: Theory and Research*. The book presents a model of input processing, how this model interacts with models of the way in which Universal Grammar and L1 operate in SLA, and the predictions and explanation of phenomena in SLA that result from this model. In the book there are attempts to link input processing, as one aspect of SLA, to those processes used, for example, in the restructuring of the linguistic system. Also described in some detail is the nature of processing instruction, a type of form-focused instruction motivated by the model of input processing. Of relevance to the present discussion is Chapter 4 in which five research projects on processing instruction are presented. One of the purposes in writing this article was to allow the reader to see the development and implementation of a research agenda in this one area. Following are the studies and their foci of investigation (research questions) included in that chapter.

VanPatten and Cadierno (1993). How do processing instruction and more traditional grammar instruction compare? (Measurements: sentence-level interpretation and production tasks. Target item: Spanish object pronouns and word order.)

Cadierno (1995). Do the observed effects of processing instruction obtain with different target structures? (Measurements: sentence-level interpretation and production tasks. Target item: Spanish past tense.)

Cheng (1995). Do the observed effects of processing instruction obtain with different target structures? (Measurements: sentence- and discourse-level interpretation and production tasks. Target item: Spanish copular verbs.)

VanPatten and Sanz (1995). Do the observed effects of processing instruction obtain with different measurements? (Measurements: sentence-level, question-answer, and narrative production tasks in oral and written modes. Target item: Spanish object pronouns and word order.)

VanPatten and Oikennon (1996). Are the observed effects in the research on processing instruction due to explicit information or to actual changes in the developing linguistic system? (Measurements: sentence-level interpretation and production tasks. Target item: Spanish object pronouns and word order.)

What is of interest for the present discussion is just how the research agenda emerged. Under consideration first was the nature of the targeted structure. In any given experimentation such as those under discussion, the best way to get a clean study is to limit the investigation to one grammatical structure or form. However, this in turn limits the generalizations the researcher can make about the object of investigation (in this case, the effects of processing instruction). Would we find the same effects for morphologically-oriented grammatical form? What about syntactically-oriented structures? There are also lexico-semantic forms and grammatical devices. The point here is that no study is ever definitive with regard to the target linguistic item used as a variable and this limitation pointed (in VanPatten and Cadierno 1993) toward research that needed to be subsequently conducted (in Cadierno 1995 and in Cheng 1995).

A second consideration was the assessment tasks used. In the original study (VanPatten and Cadierno 1993), we used sentence-level, aural

interpretation tasks and sentence-level, written production tasks. Again, we were aware that these tasks limited the generalizability of the findings. Would the effects appear with more discourse-oriented tasks and would they appear if the tasks were all oral? Once again no study is ever definitive with regard to the measurement instruments used. For our research on processing instruction, this meant at least one if not two more studies in which the assessment task became an important variable of study (as in Cheng 1995 and VanPatten and Sanz 1995).

Under final consideration were more theoretical issues. In any study on grammar instruction or focus on form, one must consider whether observed effects are due to actual changes in the interlanguage or are due to monitoring, that is, the use of explicit information or knowledge when performing a task. To address this question, we replicated the original Van-Patten and Cadierno study but separated explicit information from structured input activities and compared two experimental groups to a third that received processing instruction exactly as in the original study (i.e., VanPatten and Oikennon 1996).

By now one can see the thought processes that went into the studies on processing instruction. The bottom line in all of our considerations was generalizability: Are we comfortable generalizing our findings to all domains? The answer was that we could not be; the research agenda was born the minute we began the original study. One could rightly ask, why not just build all these considerations into the study from the very beginning? Why not conduct one large study and simply get it all over with? This is certainly possible, but not advisable. In the first place, the more variables loaded into a single study, the more it becomes likely that something will go wrong. Second, the statistical procedures can become complex with multiple analyses based on multiple variables. (In quantitative research, cleaner is always better.) Third, it may be physically impossible to do the *Big Study.* In our case, we would have needed ten different teaching packets and at least 40 sections of Spanish, plus the trained personnel to carry out the research. And finally, very often one needs to start with a smaller project just to see if an initial hypothesis is supported.

At this point, it is useful to list sample empirical studies, each suggesting a research agenda that has yet to be put into place. Based on the considerations and thought processes we have used in conducting research on processing instruction, it is clear that much more research is suggested by these initial studies.

Scott (1989). In this study, Scott attempted to compare explicit with implicit teaching. She compared two groups, one that received explicit explanation and practice on two structures and another that received exposure to the structures as they were embedded in aural input. Scott's results were not conclusive and a number of critical observations can be made about the study. Important follow-up studies include those in which the grammatical items are altered, the assessment instruments are altered, and the very nature of explicit and implicit teaching is altered. That Scott obtained inconclusive results itself suggests that this study needs to be replicated and refined.

Wing (1987). In this study, Wing found that teachers varied greatly in their use of the L2 in classrooms and that, on average, the L2 was used for communicative purposes about 10% of class time. In this case, follow-up studies could include altering the nature of the definition of communicative use as operationalized by Wing, using a much larger sample, and comparing secondary classes with university-level classes. Altering only the operationalization of communication so that it included a more careful examination of teacher talk could yield studies with different conclusions.

VanPatten (1990). In this oft-cited study, it was found that learners who were asked to explicitly attend to grammatical morphemes and, at the same time, listen to a passage for its content suffered considerable comprehension loss compared to two other groups (one that listened for content only and one that listened for content and simultaneously attended to a key word). The results suggest great difficulty in attending to form and meaning at the same time. What is needed as follow-up studies are those in which comprehensibility of the passage is altered. Is it possible that learners could attend to meaning and form at the same time if what they listened to was considerably easier to understand? Altering the stimulus from discourse-level to sentence-level might also affect the results. In addition, altering the stimulus from aural to written material could affect the outcome.

Too often researchers think their research is complete merely because "they got results." In the above examples, each researcher obtained results, but each study is limited by its generalizability.[2] A particular point should be made explicit. The emergence of a research agenda functions best when one begins with an articulated theory or framework. Theories and frameworks allow researchers to make predictions that can be tested. For

this reason, we see fewer one-shot studies coming from researchers working within Universal Grammar, Teachability and Learnability (now called Processability), Input Processing, the Competition Model, and other frameworks. It may very well be that at least some LPDs may have difficulty in developing a research agenda because they do not enter the profession with such a theoretical framework underlying their research. If this is the case, we must ask important questions about graduate education, questions that go beyond the scope of this article but questions that, nonetheless, should be addressed in other contexts.

Integrating Research

Another concern regarding LPDs and research is the integration of their research agenda with language program direction. Pragmatically motivated, this is an interesting question. Research, however, is carried out because scholars are intellectually curious; researchers have questions that they would like to investigate. All of the research domains listed previously can be conducted within the context of a language program. The issue for every LPD should be: What questions interest me and why are those questions important to investigate? The point here is that a scholar's research agenda need not form part of language program direction; a research agenda should first and foremost be something that captures the interest and is worthy of investigation. If some LPDs are worried that their research is not relevant or too theoretical, we would do well to recall that research on language learning itself and the processes involved in it is never wasted. All research on language teaching implies an underlying theory of language acquisition—whether articulated or not—and researchers engaged in discussions about the nature of the processes involved in language acquisition and language use do produce significant work. Still relevant today are S. Pit Corder's remarks from over 30 years ago:

> We have been reminded recently of von Humboldt's statement that we cannot really teach language, we can only create conditions in which it will develop spontaneously in the mind in its own way. We shall never improve our ability to create such favourable conditions until we learn more about the way a learner learns and what his built-in syllabus is. (Corder 1967, as repeated in Corder 1981, pp. 12–13).

A second implication of the concern for connecting research to the language program is that LPDs have no intellectual outlet outside of the language program. This indeed may be true and some of the issues related to this matter have been previously addressed in Lee and VanPatten (1991).[3] Two of the questions posed in this previous work are: What opportunities are there for LPDs to teach in an area of specialty? and What opportunities are there for LPDs to work with graduate students, not as teachers but as researchers? In major research institutions, significant research advances are made by those who have access to teach in their specialty. For this reason, at institutions where significant research is a part of the tenure profile, untenured faculty should teach graduate courses in their fields from the first year of coming on line. However, it is of course true that not all institutions offer graduate programs in which LPDs can teach specialty courses. I will explore this point in a different way as I discuss the relationship between applied linguistics and literature departments in the next section.

On the Education of Colleagues

Many, if not most, colleagues in literary studies do not understand the contemporary field of applied linguistics, especially SLA. A perusal of the MLA job list, for example, suggests that at times the term second language acquisition is used synonymously with either language teaching or methodology, a synonimity never intended or suggested by those who founded contemporary SLA studies. Likewise, the term applied linguistics is often used in a restricted sense to refer to language teaching only. Since the vast majority of the advertised jobs are for LPDs, the conflation of the terms SLA and applied linguistics with language teaching is even more evident. Educated in an era in which applied linguistics literally meant applying linguistics to language teaching (i.e., applying structural linguistics to yield contrastive analysis), established literary scholars (the predominant authors of these ads) do not understand that applied linguistics has moved on to be a much broader and encompassing term that represents an active community of researchers and scholars. Interestingly, not one of the invited colloquia of the AAAL meeting or the invited plenaries of SLRF listed at the outset of this article deals with language teaching; all deal with language acquisition and/or language use. Colleagues in literary studies have not grasped this fact about applied linguistics. In many modern language departments across the country, then, the term second

language acquisition has been distorted and remade into some past image of methodology that no longer exists.

The issue, of course, is how to educate our literary colleagues. But is this the only solution and is it viable? In all institutions in which there are LPDs, our literary colleagues are busy with their own agenda. They, too, have research to conduct, classes to teach, dissertations to direct, meetings to attend, and so on. Their incentive to learn about another field is minimal. This is most strongly revealed by chairs and heads of such departments, chairs and heads who come from literary backgrounds. During tenure and promotion cases, for example, these department leaders are often bedeviled by whom to ask for outside letters of evaluation and they sometimes have difficulty in judging these letters once they come in. That they do not know who the scholars are, why they are the leading scholars in the field, and what their research is suggests that not even the leadership of departments in which LPDs find themselves is conversant with the field of applied linguistics and SLA. Finally, we need to be honest about the sociopolitical nature of language departments; in many literary-oriented departments, applied linguistics and SLA are simply second-class areas of research and teaching.

Is it possible that in the late twentieth century we have two radically distinct fields thrust together within contemporary "language" departments, fields that have only as much in common as entomology and social psychology? Perhaps a more radical solution should be explored at this point. Rather than spend our time educating colleagues, it may be time to consider independence. Literary studies is literary studies and applied linguistics/SLA is applied linguistics/SLA. Instead of educating colleagues, our time may be better spent educating deans and administrators. The latter do not understand the professional problems that applied linguists/SLA researchers face in literary-oriented departments and are generally dependent on the information provided to them by the heads and chairs of these same departments. With deans and administrators, it is worth exploring the possibility of a healthy professional development of the field, in this case, the creation of independent units for applied linguistics within research and teaching institutions.

Conclusion

In this article I have made a number of comments regarding LPDs and research agenda. I have discussed what I perceive to be the problems in

educating colleagues about our research, I have described various research domains for LPDs, and I have described the development of at least one research agenda to provide a sample framework for others. Along the way I have made some rather strong points about the status of applied linguistics/SLA and the research of LPDs and I would like to return to those comments here with an eye toward the future. First, graduate education in applied linguistics/SLA must be carefully examined to be sure that exiting Ph.D.s are equipped not only with knowledge about SLA and language teaching, but also with the research tools they will need. These tools include a framework or theory as a point of departure and a research agenda falling out of the theory. I repeat the important question that needs to be asked of every student getting ready to launch a doctoral thesis: Where do you go from here?

A second point is that we must seriously consider the issue of educating our colleagues. Is education in order? The future of applied linguistics/SLA may very well depend on its autonomy from literature departments. What is needed at this point in time is critical discussion of the benefits and drawbacks of such autonomy and to what extent independence is either necessary or potentially useful.

Although I have been rather critical at several points in this article, I would like to close with a positive observation. The presence of LPDs in language departments is a rather new phenomenon in the history of the U.S. academy. As one reads the MLA job list, it seems that each year there are an increasing number of calls for persons with expertise in SLA and applied linguistics. The description of a great number of these positions would never have appeared in the MLA job list some thirty years ago. Undoubtedly, we have done something right and both SLA and applied linguistics in general have emerged as viable fields in late-twentieth century university. This is a very positive thing indeed. We must now examine where we are and where we want to go as scholars and professionals.

Notes

1. This is an expanded and revised version of a paper presented at the AAUSC session held at the annual ACTFL meeting in 1996. My thanks go to Carol Klee for her invitation to participate, to Sally Magnan who suggested that this article be submitted for the current volume, and to L. Kathy Heilenman and the reviewers for their useful comments. All errors in content are mine.

2. This is not to suggest that there are no examples of scholars with research agenda. Indeed there are. and a number of them are listed in the works cited.

3. In addition, see Dvorak (1986).

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