The Role of Research in the Second Language Classroom

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Keynote Speech

An important question in the field of English language teaching and learning is 'What is the relationship between research and second language (L2) instruction?'. A second question is 'What should the relationship be?'.

There are several ways to answer these questions about what has been called the research-pedagogy link, and in fact, a 2017 issue of ELT Journal contained several articles debating this topic. On one hand, Peter Medgyes titled his article 'The (ir)relevance of academic research for the language teacher', and argued that teachers do not need second language acquisition (SLA) research or researchers to inform their teaching. Medgyes said that 'until proven otherwise, the pedagogical relevance of language-related academic research is of dubious value and the role researchers play may be considered parasitical' (p. 496).

Additional reasons why teachers may not feel the need to engage with research is because they are busy with their own classrooms. Furthermore, they are not paid to do research, neither are they trained to do it. It is also true that research is not always easy for non-researchers to understand, it is sometimes contradictory, not always practical for teachers, and can be difficult to access. These are all reasons why teachers might not engage with research.

In response to Medgyes' article, Amos Paran wrote about the positive aspects of a research-pedagogy link. Paran stated, 'I suggest that the issue is not that research is not relevant to teachers, but rather that we – practicioners and researchers alike – have failed to maintain the dialogue between us' (p. 506). Paran went on to enumerate several ways in which the dialogue

between researchers and teachers could be maintained, including through (a) initial teacher training programs, (b) research incorporated into textbooks, (c) continuing professional development informed by research, and (d) teachers engaging in their own research.

In addition to these opinion pieces, there are at least two research studies that have investigated language teachers' attitudes towards and experiences with research. First, Marsden and Kasprowicz (2017) surveyed 183 foreign language teachers in the UK. Results indicated that while teachers did not have entirely negative perceptions of research, they had little direct or indirect exposure to research. In addition, teachers had difficulties physically accessing research, as well as understanding it. A second study by Sato and Loewen (2018) investigated the perceptions of 12 EFL teachers in Chile. Teachers reported that having knowledge of research gave them confidence and helped them with pedagogical issues. In addition, research was encouraged by their university.

However, the teachers also talked about obstacles to engaging with research, including the lack of physical accessibility and time, as well as a lack of institutional support. Teachers also stated that there were limited initiatives between researchers and teachers that would allow them to find out more about research. Sato and Loewen concluded that both researchers and teachers need to be willing and open for there to be an effective research-pedagogy dialogue.

One way in which SLA researchers have been prioritizing pedagogy recently is through the development of the field of instructed second language acquisition (ISLA). There have been several books (e.g., Loewen, 2015; Loewen & Sato, 2017) and articles (e.g., Long, 2017; VanPatten, 2017) that have solidified this as an academic area of interest. Loewen (2015) defines ISLA as 'a theoretically and empirically based field of academic inquiry that aims to understand how the systematic manipulation of the mechanisms of learning and/or the conditions under which they occur enable or facilitate the development and acquisition of an additional language' (p. 2).

In more reader friendly terms, ISLA is research that is specifically focused on language teaching and learning. However, there are several important components of Loewen's definition to consider.

The fact that ISLA is theoretically and empirically based means that there is more than just teachers' intuitions informing pedagogical practices. ISLA theories provide explanations for why some classroom practices might be more effective for learning than others, and empirical research provides evidence for or against such theories. Systematic manipulation is another important component of the definition, and it refers to the fact that someone, somewhere is attempting to influence the learning process. Often ISLA is thought of in a classroom context; however, textbooks, self-study materials, and online materials also provide things that are intended to help the learning process. However, what is not included in this category is individuals who haphazardly try to pick up a language as they go about their everyday lives. The reference to learning mechanisms refers primarily to learner-internal cognitive processes that are involved in the learning process. Thus, the way that the brain processes input and stores language

is important, and ISLA attempts to influence those processes. Finally, the learning conditions are those learner-external factors that can influence L2 development. For example, the social settings that learners find themselves in may provide them with greater or lesser opportunities for exposure to the target language depending on the larger society. So in sum, ISLA is concerned with language learning and teaching, and ISLA research attempts to provide evidence-based pedagogy that is supported by SLA theory and research.

One frustration that teachers have with SLA research is that individual studies do not provide conclusive evidence regarding a pedagogical practice, and often times multiple studies provide contradictory evidence. However, the use of meta-analysis and synthetic research in SLA and ISLA means that researchers are able to interpret the results of research with more certainty. Meta-analysis involves systematically and statistically synthesizing individual research studies. In this way, the results are aggregated, and various factors that might make the research more or less reliable can be taken into account. In this way, meta-analyses are able to provide evidence of some of the more generalizable and durable trends in ISLA research.

Having discussed a bit of what ISLA is, it is important to consider some of its primary questions. To my mind, there are two central questions that need to be asked. First, is L2 instruction effective? Although there have been some critics of L2 instruction in general, most researchers and teachers believe that instruction can be effective for L2 learning. Otherwise, they would not be involved in the L2 learning and teaching endeavor. So an assumption that I'm working from is that, yes, L2 instruction can be effective. The second question, then, is what makes L2 instruction more or less effective? Answering this question is the primary concern of ISLA researchers.

In order to consider the effectiveness of L2 instruction, we first need to consider the goals of L2 instruction. What goals do students have? What goals do teachers have? Students may have several different goals for studying an L2. They may need to study the language as a school requirement, or they may be studying for a high-stakes language test such as TOEFL or IELTS. Students may also be interested in gaining knowledge of L2 grammar and vocabulary. And hopefully, some students want to achieve an ability to communicate in the L2. For teachers, the goals may be similar. They presumably want their students to do well in their courses, but they may also want students to be able to do academic work and communicate in the L2. In fact, I would argue that one of the primary goals for L2 study should be the ability for students to communicate in the L2.

If communicative competence is a primary goal of L2 instruction, then another question that needs to be asked is how instruction can facilitate learners' ability to communicate. In order to answer this question, it is important to consider two types of linguistic knowledge. Although SLA theorists differ somewhat in the precise descriptions of L2 knowledge, there is general agreement that learners can have two types of linguistic knowledge, namely explicit and implicit (sometimes called declarative and proceduralized knowledge). Explicit knowledge is knowledge that learners are aware of. They can verbalize this knowledge, and it is accessed through controlled processing, meaning that learners can think about and reflect upon this knowledge.

Sometimes explicit knowledge is metalinguistic in nature, but it does not have to be. Examples of explicit knowledge include knowledge about how to form regular past tense or plurals in English. 'Add *–ed* to the base form of the verb for regular past tense' is explicit knowledge. Explicit knowledge is useful if learners have time to think, such as when they are composing an essay at home; however, explicit knowledge does not contribute substantially to spontaneous communication.

In contrast, implicit knowledge is knowledge that learners are not aware of possessing. As such, implicit knowledge is accessed automatically when individuals want to communicate. In this way, it is similar to the knowledge that first language speakers have of their L1. For example, L1 speakers do not have to consciously think about grammar rules in order to use them to communicate. Implicit knowledge is very important for learners to be able to communicate. Thus, if the goal is for learners to develop the ability to communicate in the L2, then they need to develop implicit L2 knowledge.

If the goal of much L2 instruction is the development of implicit L2 knowledge so that learners can communicate in the L2, then it is important to consider what types of instruction can facilitate the development of implicit knowledge. For these purposes, L2 instruction can be divided into two main types: explicit instruction and implicit instruction. Explicit instruction occurs when teachers explicitly focus on language forms, such as through presenting linguistic rules or having learners do decontextualized practice activities. As a result, explicit instruction often results in explicit knowledge. Indeed, explicit knowledge is easy for teachers to teach and for learners to learn. In addition, learners feel as though they have truly learned something because they are able to verbalize what they have learned. For example, they can say, *Today we learned the rules for English regular past tense*. However, the problem is that knowledge of how to form English regular past tense does not help learners use it when they are talking about what they did last weekend.

Implicit instruction, on the other hand, consists of classroom activities that focus primarily on communicating and using the L2 in the classroom. As such, grammar rules are not taught, and explicit attention to linguistic forms is largely avoided. These types of activities can help with the development of implicit knowledge; however, the difficulty is that implicit knowledge takes considerable time and practice to develop. Additionally, learners may not feel like they are learning anything because they cannot verbalize what they have learned. For example, if learners practice using regular past tense by discussing what they did over the weekend, they might not feel as though they learned anything, even though they might have improved their ability to use past tense in communication.

In an effort to balance implicit and explicit instruction, focus on form (Long, 1996) and form-focused instruction (e.g., Spada, 1997) were proposed as ways in which attention to linguistic items could be incorporated into a larger communicative context. Examples of form-focused instruction include oral corrective feedback and input enhancement. Form-focused instruction

has been investigated in relation to different aspects of language, including grammar, vocabulary, and pragmatics, and we will know look at these areas in turn.

When it comes to grammar, researchers have found that both explicit and implicit instruction appear to be effective and necessary for L2 development (e.g, Li, 2010; Lyster & Saito, 2010; Norris & Ortega, 2000; Shintani, 2015). However, it is important to remember that explicit instruction, resulting in explicit knowledge, may not be the most useful for L2 communication. Nevertheless, explicit L2 linguistic knowledge can be helpful in instances of explicit testing or academic writing.

It is important also to consider the effects of specific types of form-focused instruction. For example, Lee and Huang (2008) conducted a meta-analysis of visual input enhancement, in which grammatical items are highlighted in a text, often without an accompanying explanation for the enhancement. Their meta-analysis found very little effect for input enhancement compared to the effect of texts without input enhancement. Thus, it may be important to combine input enhancement with other types of instruction.

Another area that has received considerable attention in L2 research is oral corrective feedback. Multiple meta-analyses have found effects for different types of feedback, including recasts in which a correct reformulation of the erroneous form is provided, as well as prompts in which the correct form is elicited from the learner. In addition, effects have been found for both implicit and explicit types of feedback (e.g., Li, 2010; Lyster & Saito, 2010). A takeaway point for teachers, then, is that they can vary the types of feedback they provide to their students.

Another area of interest pertaining to grammar and focus on form is that fact that learners go through stages of development for complex grammatical structures before reaching target-like norms. For example, Mackey (1999) found that corrective feedback on English question formation was effective only when it was provided at the next stage of development. Feedback that was too advanced for learners was not as beneficial.

In addition to grammar, vocabulary has also received a considerable amount of attention in L2 research. For example, Paul Nation's (e.g., Nation, 2000) research has been foundational in many aspects of what we know about vocabulary instruction. For example, he proposed that learners need to know between 95 to 98% of words in a text in order to understand it easily and to infer the meaning of new words (e.g., Nation, 2000). In addition, he investigated the frequency level of words in the language in order to help teachers know which words might be most useful for learners. He identified words in frequency bands, at the 1000, 2000, 3000, 5000, and 10,000 most frequent words. Knowing a word's frequency can help inform teachers' decisions about which words to teach in the classroom, because classroom time is limited and the task of learning vocabulary is immense. Consequently, in second language contexts, where the target language is spoken in the wider society, it might be better for teachers to focus on words of medium or lesser frequency, with the expectation that learners will be exposed to and learn the more common words as they go about their daily lives. However, in foreign language contexts where learners have little opportunity to come into contact with the target language, teachers might want to

teach more common words so that learners can increase their understand of written and spoken language.

Furthermore, there is a distinction between intentional, explicit vocabulary instruction and incidental and implicit learning. In the former, teachers teach target words directly or learners memorize lists of words. In the latter, learners may pick up words as they do extensive reading or are exposed to the language. Of course, much vocabulary knowledge is explicit. Learners are aware of the form-meaning mappings. But incidental and implicit learning can result in implicit knowledge. For example, learners may pick up word collocations implicitly, and they might also have an implicit knowledge of which words are more or less frequent in the target language. However, the bottom line for vocabulary instruction and learning is that large amounts of input are needed.

In fact, Schmitt (2008) suggested that what learners need most for vocabulary acquisition is engagement with the target language and target vocabulary. Engagement involves (a) increased frequency of exposure to vocabulary, (b) increased interaction with and noticing of vocabulary, (c) intentionality in learning words, and (d) the requirement to use specific vocabulary. Overall, it seems that virtually anything that leads to more exposure, attention to, manipulation of, or time spent on vocabulary items adds to vocabulary learning.

Pronunciation is another aspect of language that L2 researchers have investigated. One of the most important questions to ask regarding pronunciation instruction is what the goal of instruction should be. It is acknowledged that native-like pronunciation is generally not possible for most adult learners, so researchers (e.g., Levis, 2005) argue that comprehensibility, rather than a native-like accent should be the goal in the L2 classroom. Furthermore, research (e.g., Derwing, 2017) has shown that a non-target-like accent does not necessarily equate to low comprehensibility. Learners can have an accent and still be comprehensible.

Another question to consider is whether pronunciation instruction is effective. In a recent meta-analysis of 86 pronunciation studies, Lee, Jang and Plonsky (2015) found a large effect for instruction, especially with corrective feedback. Additionally, they found that instruction was more effective for beginning or advanced learners, but it was less effective for intermediate learners.

Finally, L2 research has considered the acquisition of pragmatics, which involves using language appropriately in various social contexts. Although often overlooked in the language classroom, pragmatics is an important component of communicative competence, but it can be difficult to learn and is often acquired by more advanced learners. When considering pragmatics, a distinction is of made between pragmalinguistic knowledge and sociopragmatic knowledge. Pragmalinguistic knowledge involves knowing the pragmatic force of different linguistic forms.

An example of pragmalinguistic knowledge involves English modals, such as *can, might, should*, and *must*. Learners need to know that these different modals imply different levels of obligation or certainty, with can implying the least certainty or obligation (e.g., You can go to the store.) compared to the strong level of obligation implied by *must* (e.g., You must go to the

store.) In contrast to pragmalinguistic knowledge, sociopragmatic knowledge refers to the knowledge of the pragmatic requirements of different social situations. For example, making a request in a business context has different pragmatic requirements from making a request in a family context. These two types of pragmatic knowledge are not necessarily related and do not develop equally.

Learners may have sociopragmatic knowledge regarding the pragmatic requirements of a specific social context; however, they might lack the pragmalinguistic knowledge to successfully achieve the needed pragmatic level appropriate for the context. Pragmatics instruction is important, though often neglected, in the classroom. Instruction may be necessary for learners to achieve advanced levels of proficiency (e.g., Jeon & Kaya, 2006; Bardovi-Harlig, 2017). Moreover, learners, especially in foreign language contexts, often have very limited exposure to different pragmatic contexts. Learners typically interact only with the teacher or other learners in the classroom. Thus, they might learn what language is appropriate in the classroom, but they are not exposed to the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic norms that apply to other contexts, such as more formal business context or more informal family settings. Another important reason to teach pragmatics in the L2 classroom is the importance of pragmatic competence for social interaction. A lack of pragmatic skills is often viewed as a character flaw rather than a linguistic deficit. For example, if a learner uses the wrong modal and grammar when making a request, such as *You must write me a recommendation letter*, the inappropriate pragmatic force may be much more salient than the grammatical error or any foreign accent. The recipient of such a request might deem the learner to be rude and may be inclined not to grant the request because it did not have the appropriate pragmatic level. These real-world implications might be much greater than those that accompany errors in grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation.

In summary, this presentation has provided a general overview of some of the important insights that L2 research can provide to teachers. It shows that instruction can be effective for L2 learning, development, and acquisition; however, not all instruction is equally beneficial, and researchers are still investigating which types of instruction might be better for specific aspects of language or for developing specific types of knowledge. However, one implication of this research for teachers is that a mix of explicit and implicit instruction might be most effective for developing learners who can communicate accurately and fluently with those around them.

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