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## Pathways to the Successful Teaching and Learning of an L2: Introduction to the Honorary Volume of the Language Teaching Research Quarterly

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**Special Issue: Pathways to the Successful Teaching and Learning of an L2**

**In Honor of Andrew Cohen's Contributions to L2 Teaching and Learning Research**

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### **Introduction**

When the editors of the *Language Teaching Research Quarterly*, Christine Coombe and Hassan Mohebbi, suggested to me that I organize a special issue in my honor, my first reaction was that it would be immodest for me to take on such an activity. Even though I identified a series of topics about which I really wanted to create a special volume, it was with some trepidation that I reached out to colleagues that I really wanted to hear from on these topics. Consequently, it was most gratifying for me to see how easy it actually was to recruit these colleagues to take part in

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this venture. The five themes that they have written about are ones that have engaged my interest over many years.

It has been an ongoing concern of mine to find ways to enhance the experiences of language learners, primarily because of my lifelong passion to continue learning languages. I am currently working on my 13th, Mandarin. I use five languages professionally and have modest-to-minimal skills at this point in the other languages that I have learned. Experience with so many languages over the years has given me an opportunity to experience everything from surprising success to abysmal failures, both with regard to my handling of basic language skills, as well as with regard to the pragmatics associated with the specific language communities involved.

In my brief introduction to this collection of papers, I will share with you my rationale for why the 5 topics addressed by my colleagues in this special issue are of concern to me. I will consider this special volume a contribution to the field if it activates in your minds as readers new or renewed interest in one or more of these topics, leading either to research on your part and/or to instructional efforts both in the classroom and beyond.

### **White & Bown – Encouraging learners to become better-informed consumers of L2 learning opportunities**

It has been my concern for some time that while individuals are likely to devote considerable attention to checking consumer reviews before investing in some new computer gear, a cell phone, or a new car, they may give short shrift to considerations about how to study a new language. White and Bown rightly note that language learning is an infinitely diverse and complex endeavor and that it is not easy for individuals to make decisions and choices about how best to invest their time, energy, and resources in pursuing their language learning goals. In all truth, prospective language learners may feel that they lack the ability to critically appraise their options, to orchestrate their resources, and to optimize their learning opportunities on a moment-by-moment basis. In their contribution to this volume, these two highly-experienced language educators spell out ways in which language learners can approach language learning more reflectively in order to make more savvy decisions in the face of a multitude of options.

### **Csizér & Illés – Helping to maximize learners' motivation for L2 learning**

Having studied so many languages, I am acutely aware of how my own motivation has fluctuated depending on the language skills called upon by the task at hand – for example, the extent to which it calls for skill at speaking, listening, reading, writing, dealing with grammar, translation, or pragmatics. And not only have I noted a dramatic difference in motivation from skill to skill in my own L2 performance, but I have also experienced firsthand how motivation can vary dramatically across languages. So, for example, while I have little difficulty comprehending and expressing myself in Hebrew and in three Romance languages on a number of sophisticated topics, my comprehension of spoken Mandarin and my ability to speak are woefully limited to very basic topics. My coping mechanism in Mandarin is to focus on my writing in *pinyin*, which I am able to accomplish successfully at an advanced level. Fortunately, as a semi-retired

professor, I am not obligated to use Mandarin conversationally in contrast to many people in the workforce

Fortunately, the field of motivation in L2 language learning has received considerable attention of late, as Csizér and Illés detail in their contribution to this volume, both with regard to L2 motivation theories and their application to language teaching and learning situations. Especially promising, in my mind, is the work on learners' selves and how a better understanding of these interrelationships can contribute to the enhancement of learners' level of engagement and long-term motivation.

### **Tomlinson – Assisting learners in orchestrating their inner voice for L2 learning**

Many years ago Brian Tomlinson's work got me in touch with the idea of using my *inner voice* (i.e. internal oral and silent language, as well as visual imagery) to practice the language that I was currently working on. Tomlinson encouraged teachers to have learners perform tasks designed to contribute to the development of their L2 inner voice. His main advice at the time was to avoid forcing learners into premature production of the L2. His concern was that language courses often require beginners to produce in the L2 from day #1. His contention has been that the processing energy required to do this can inhibit the use of the L1 inner voice and at the same time prevent the development of an L2 inner voice. He would also advise teachers working with learners at the lower-proficiency levels to pause for ten seconds after asking a question in the L2 to the class to allow them to prepare an inner-voice answer prior to sharing their response externally with the class.

I am delighted that Tomlinson agreed to revisit this topic for this special issue. Hopefully, there will be those of you who see the value of incorporating L2 inner-voice activities into the language learning routines of your students.

### **Eslami & Derakhshan – Promoting advantageous ways for teachers and learners to deal with corrective feedback**

Through learning many languages in a variety of ways over my lifetime, I have become acutely aware of how differential the impact of corrective feedback (CF) may be, depending on the circumstances. I have also become aware as a learner that just because I give special attention to CF directed at me, this does not necessarily mean that this particular CF will have a lasting impact. I provide two anecdotes speaking to this issue. The first is that after having lived in Israel for 10 years, I revisited my notebook from my intermediate Hebrew language class when – at the age of 31– I was desperately attempting to shift from teaching my courses in the School of Education at the Hebrew University through English (the first year) to teaching through Hebrew (which I did the remaining 15 years). The notebook was replete with Hebrew grammar rules, dealing with matters such as how to inflect Hebrew verbs for past tense especially using the passive voice (e.g. *huchlat* 'it was decided'). My finding was that just from daily contact with Hebrew, I had acquired much of the grammar material that 10 years earlier I was absolutely unable to learn, even with the best CF possible. The second anecdote is that at the age of 52 and

living back in the States and on sabbatical in Hawaii, I took an accelerated course in Japanese and wrote down every single error that I made in my written Japanese in an effort to improve my written grammar. Nonetheless, I found that the lasting effect of this effort was minimal.

This is all by way of preamble before expressing my indebtedness to Eslami and Derakhshan for their comprehensive effort at laying out the issues regarding CF. As you will see in the article, Figure 1 graphically portrays the complexity in which any given effort at CF is embedded.

Is it any wonder that the CF I received both on my Hebrew grammar early on and on my Japanese in an accelerated course (4 hours per day) were of little lasting value to me? Clearly, there were many mediating factors which ultimately diminished the extent to which I benefited from the CF, even though I had a respectable track record as a language learner and performer, both in and out of the classroom.

### **Bardovi-Harlig & Burghardt – Preventing attrition and promoting retention**

For all the *learning* of languages that I have done in my lifetime, I have probably done far more *attriting*. It is curious that the field of language teaching devotes most of its energy to helping learners acquire language and relatively little to supporting them in retaining what they have acquired.

I invited Bardovi-Harlig to write about this issue in this volume because some years ago she had done a review of the literature on language attrition, and I knew that her extensive experience in both language teaching and language learning would position her well to speak to issues related to language retention. I was delighted to see in the article that she and her colleague Burghardt provide a creative and detailed treatment of the topic which should be of guidance to readers interested in issues of attrition and retention. They lay out principles for language pedagogy designed to promote retention among adult learners. They also give numerous practical examples, including suggestions for how to make use of current technological advances aimed at language learning.

Once again, let me express my deep gratitude to my colleagues for their efforts in producing the stimulating papers. Until we come up with a language chip that is implanted in the brain so as to make us instantly high-proficiency speakers of an L2, we will need to continue relying on our own skills at both learning and using the language. It is my sense that teachers can be more proactive about providing L2 instruction consistent with the five topic areas covered in this volume, and that learners themselves can take more responsibility for their own degree of success with the L2. Hopefully, this collection of articles will provide readers with timely and provocative input concerning these issues.