



Language Teaching Research Quarterly

2024, Vol. 39, 7–17



The Past and the Future of Language Learning and Teaching: An Interview with Diane Larsen-Freeman

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Received 20 June 2023

Accepted 11 November 2023

Many thanks for accepting our invitation for the interview.

- 1. Could you share with us some of your early experiences? For example, when did you first enter the field of language education? What kindled your interest in this field? Also, any particular individuals/events that had a significant influence on your career in those early days?**

Thank you for the opportunity you have given me to reflect on the arc of my career. To begin, I have always been curious about how we learn. That is why I majored in psychology as an undergraduate student. However, it was when I joined the US Peace Corps and taught English in Malaysia for two years that I became specifically curious about how languages are learned. Living in Borneo for two years was a life-altering experience for me in many ways. For one, I tried very hard to draw on my limited teaching experience to be the best possible English language teacher for my students, but that limitation motivated me to want to know better how to teach. Another way that the experience was influential was that I came to appreciate what having an intercultural perspective offered, and I yearned to travel more widely and to learn about and from other peoples and their cultures.

These influences led me to pursue a TESOL master's degree in linguistics and education at the University of Michigan. It was an exciting time to be an applied linguistics student as the cognitive revolution, which would challenge traditional conceptions of language, was

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<https://doi.org/10.32038/ltrq.2024.39.02>

underway and as the study of “second language acquisition” was just coming of age. At an early 1970s conference in Ann Arbor, I met Pit Corder, whom some credit with giving birth to the modern-day study of SLA through his article “The Significance of Learner’s Errors.” Many teachers came to realize that their attempts to prevent their students from making errors were neither advisable nor realistic. Encouraged by my professors, I stayed on at the university to complete a Ph.D. degree in linguistics with an SLA focus. In retrospect, I realize how fortunate I was to be in a place where and at a time when my three interests were center stage: language, language learning, and language teaching!

2. We realized you were the editor for the prestigious journal of “*Language Learning*” for quite many years, could you share with us that experience?

I am sure that you would find my experience amusing. You see, I began editing *Language Learning* in 1980. At that time, manuscripts were submitted in paper form. The manuscript then had to be photocopied and sent out to reviewers, who mailed back their reviews. My decision to publish the manuscript or not and specific feedback was also posted subsequently to the author. All this activity involved a labor-intensive and time-consuming process.

I made the situation even more difficult for myself because I initiated several changes as editor. First, after some reflection, I decided that I would adopt the role of “educator” as editor. It was not because I thought I was smarter than the manuscript authors, but it was because I thought I could provide useful feedback to the authors and the reviewers. I made sure that every author received some comments from me. I also started the practice of sending each reviewer the evaluations from the other reviewers of a particular manuscript so they could compare their evaluation to that of the others. Finally, beginning initially at a TESOL Convention, I convened a gathering of other editors and held a session for conference participants in an attempt to demystify the publishing process. I also produced and published a summary chart, listing all the prominent journals in our field and related information, such as the process for submitting manuscripts for publication consideration. I did all this in an attempt to strengthen the quality of scholarship in the field and to make it more inclusive.

3. Among the many books that you have authored and edited, could you share with us some interesting background information /inside stories about them?

Well, for one, I can explain how *The Grammar Book* got its name. Using the definite article in the title may seem rather arrogant. However, it might help to counter this impression when I explain that the book took my co-author Marianne Celce-Murcia and me seven years to write, and during that long period, the publisher kept calling and asking when “the grammar book” was going to be finished. Later, when it came time to give it a title, the publisher suggested why not just call it “The Grammar Book?” Surprisingly, the second edition of the book also took 7 years to write and grew from 600 to 800 pages. The same schedule and size applied to the third edition, which now numbers almost 1,000 pages. Has grammar changed that much to warrant the increasing length, I was asked? Well, yes. Grammar has changed, but the length of our book was more a factor of our goal to provide more complete, up-to-date, and accessible accounts of the target structures. As for why it took such a lengthy time to complete the

editions, I referred to the authoring process as "writing around the fringes of my life" because, at the same time that I was writing the book, I was teaching at a university, presenting papers at conferences, taking care of parents, and raising a family!

Techniques and Principles was based on my teaching an approaches course with colleagues at the Graduate School for International Training (SIT). The challenge in writing this book was two-fold. For one thing, per usual, I was learning along with my students. The MAT program was based on the principles of experiential learning. This meant that in order to understand a method, we had to experience it first-hand and subsequently reflect on and analyze our experience. Thus, we regularly invited leading methodologists to introduce their methods to our students: Caleb Gattegno, Earl Stevick, and other methodologists presented us with rich and provocative experiences each time they came to visit, and from them and from my colleagues and students, I learned a great deal.

The second challenge in writing this book was the question of how to capture the dynamism of a lesson-in-progress in order to help readers appreciate its distinctiveness. I decided that having readers "enter" a classroom where the method was being used and observe and analyze it would work better than having them only read a description of it. And, this is what I did with each method in the volume.

Later, when officials at the US Department of State asked me to create a videotape series based on the book, I invited my SIT colleagues to accompany me to Washington, DC, where on one single Saturday, we recorded six lessons with international students who had been recruited to be language students for the day. We didn't know the students beforehand, and they didn't know us, but my colleagues were highly skilled teachers, and the students were marvelously cooperative. In any case, that is why both teachers and students in the video are wearing name tags. I later returned to Washington, DC, and edited each lesson, reducing it from one hour to 15 minutes. Trying to distill the essence of each was exceedingly difficult to accomplish. On those occasions in DC, I also recorded a commentary for each lesson, but honestly speaking, I was using a teleprompter for the first time with no time for a rehearsal, and I felt that my commentary was the weakest part of the whole series.

4. If we look at language teaching methods from a bird's eye view, what are, in your opinion, the greatest developments in language teaching methods in the last four decades since the publication of your book (*Techniques and Principles*) in 1986?

Well, certainly one that has captured a lot of attention is Task-Based Language Teaching. Importantly, TBLT is an attempt to integrate linguistic form and meaning. Also addressing this need are CBI---content-based instruction and CLIL---content language and integrated learning, both of which integrate the learning of school subjects with the learning of another language. Another important move in language teaching these days is the use of new technology. Although we have yet to fully appreciate the contributions of such technology to language teaching, certainly one of them is the ability to search through large digitized corpora of attested language to reveal common collocations and other patterns in the form of constructions, an enterprise that contributes to corpus-informed teaching. In addition, these new technologies open classrooms to multimodal communication.

Recent attention has focused on language learners, demonstrating the unique qualities that define each one and recognizing the emotional dimension of language learning and its effect on the learner's identity. Also, there is a recognition that learners with different identities—refugees, migrants, business people, international sojourners, students, and immigrants—may want and need to develop their language skills differently. Furthermore, not all learners will need to interact with native speakers of the target language, and no language is the province of its native speakers alone, thus calling into question relying on native language usage as a measuring stick. Instead, for many students, instruction should aim for intelligibility, not conformity to native speaker norms.

This awareness and an appreciation of the empowerment that comes with language learning has spurred initiatives to promote social justice, recognizing that even opportunities to learn another language are not equally distributed. These critical initiatives have also helped us acknowledge that the use of the learner's other languages is not an impediment to additional language learning, but rather can be a resource to be drawn on in facilitating additional learning in the quest for plurilingualism and through practices such as translanguaging.

5. What do you think are the biggest challenges facing language teaching methodologies nowadays? Why there is little discussion and research related to this area at the macro level, except for a few articles published in TESOL Quarterly, like TESOL at 40?

As with many fields, the primary locus of activity shifts over time. When I first entered the field, the focus was squarely on language teaching, and the journals featured articles on facilitating language teaching, such as by basing the development of instructional materials on contrastive analyses. The main focus on teaching was replaced in the literature by an interest in theories of language, such as transformational grammar, and theories of learning, such as cognitivism. Then, there was a time when the gaze of the field turned once again to teaching—drawing attention this time was a variety of different language teaching methods: silent way, community language learning, suggestopedia, etc. This focus on methods in turn shifted to newer theories of language learning. Of course, this sequence does not unfold strictly linearly. And, even when a particular phase no longer occupies center stage, this does not mean that it is no longer important; it is just that these days the normal rhythm of the field has not made teaching methods prominent. They still exist, and they still are important.

Beyond the natural rhythms of foci in the field, there was a call a while ago for the field to enter into a post-method era. The call was invoked in order to liberate teachers from the uniformity supposedly imposed by methods. While this could be a worthy cause, it overlooks the fact that teachers operate with some measure of agency in interpreting and implementing methods in their local contexts. Also ignored is the vital role that language teaching methods play in the education of language teachers. They give teacher trainees and practicing teachers an opportunity to make explicit and clarify their own thoughts and beliefs about what constitutes good teaching. They also introduce teachers to a wide variety of teaching practices with which to experiment and incorporate into their own teaching approach.

6. When we look at this area of research (language teaching methodology) in the four corners/continents of the world, in which region do we witness big achievements in language teaching education and research? And which region lacks such developments? Also, what will be the future trends for language teaching methods?

I am not sufficiently knowledgeable to answer your question with regard to different regions of the world. Also, it is frankly difficult to compare achievements because often language learning efforts have specific purposes/goals. For instance, there are projects around the world that are seeking to revitalize indigenous languages in order to prevent their extinction. While many struggle, some, such as the revitalization of Irish Gaelic, have been more successful.

As for methodology, some innovations, such as the teaching of learning strategies and project-based learning, are popular. Then, too, new technology is looming as a major influence in education generally. Obviously, its influence will vary depending on its access and uptake. All this is to say that what is especially important is that any innovation takes into account the local ecology and that all the stakeholders (i.e., teachers, school leaders, students, parents, policymakers, etc.) in the ecology endorse the innovation. Of course, a consensus is difficult to achieve, but too often well-intentioned mandates from governments, for example, fail to achieve the intended results because support is not forthcoming from all parties, so high-stakes examinations impede the establishment of new standards and practices, or there is inadequate training to go along with the mandates.

7. Now, let's turn to grammar and grammaring. Could you share with us the background stories when you put forward the concept of 'grammaring'. How does grammaring distinguish it from grammar? Why grammar has been marginalized in language teaching? How can we redirect the attention to grammar? Will grammaring be the solution for the future?

I coined the word "grammaring" because I had had the experience, as many language teachers have had, of teaching my students' grammar rules and having them do exercises applying them, only to find out that they were not able to use what they had learned at a later time for their own purposes. Trying to understand this situation, I encountered Alfred North Whitehead's term, "inert knowledge problem." Whitehead was not writing about language teaching, but he did recognize the problem of students not being able to use what they had learned in the classroom at a later place and point in time. The term "inert" suggests that students' knowledge was inactive, so I reasoned that grammar must be taught more dynamically. I coined the term "grammaring" because the suffix/morpheme "-ing" in English suggests an activity in progress. I coupled this understanding with my contention that grammar is more than form or structure. It can be characterized by three dimensions: form (morphosyntax), meaning (semantics), and use (pragmatics), thus recognizing grammar as a resource for social interaction. Thus, grammaring refers to the ability (a skill—not knowledge of rules alone) to use grammar structures accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately in a given context. And, I recommended ways of teaching each dimension in a more dynamic manner after determining which dimension affords the greatest learning challenge for a particular group of students.

As for why grammar instruction was marginalized, some methodologists suggested that if learners could understand the language around them, they would simply acquire grammar unconsciously. Others suggested that grammar was best taught implicitly. Both efforts built on the success of L1 acquisition and led in some cases to L2 teachers not receiving instruction in grammar themselves. Then, there is the inert knowledge problem. However, there is at least an equal amount of research suggesting that not all students benefit from the lack of grammar instruction. Some students need explicit attention to grammar, or even better, to grammaring. As teachers, it seems to me that we have the responsibility to facilitate the learning of all of our students, which may mean foregoing theoretical purity for a principled eclecticism.

8. You were the very first applied linguist to introduce the Complexity/Chaos theory into language learning and language education, could you share with us some background information about it (when you first introduced it to the field in 1997)? Also, how has it developed over these years, could you name some significant developmental milestones or books or events that are particularly relevant and essential, etc.? And what does the future hold for complexity theory or CDST?

I actually first presented a paper on Chaos/Complexity theory at a Second Language Research Forum held at McGill University in Montreal in 1994. I learned about the theory quite serendipitously by reading James Gleick's book on science, *Chaos: The Making of a New Science*. On page 24, he wrote: "Nonlinearity means that the act of playing the game has a way of changing the nonlinear rules." Gleick wasn't writing about language rules at all, but this statement opened my eyes to the possibility of change when the language game was played, metaphorically, of course. I found this possibility intriguing because my education in linguistics had led me to believe that rules were rather static and slow to change. As I mentioned in my previous answer, I made a connection between grammaring and its dynamism as a potential solution to the inert knowledge problem.

After finishing the Gleick book, I read a great deal about chaos and complexity theories, and I came to conceive of language as an open, nonlinear complex system, one that changes through feedback and adaptation, and is characterized by emergence. Emergence refers to the novelty that occurs in a complex system as a result of the interconnectedness of its components as well as their interconnectedness with the ecology in which they are situated. I found such qualities of language not only to be useful in understanding language change but also to be ones that could have a felicitous influence on our understanding of language learning, which I preferred to call language development (SLD) rather than language acquisition, arguing that there was no one point at which it could be said that a language was fully acquired.

At a later point in time, the ever-increasing number of us in North America who became committed to complexity theory to study SLD joined with European colleagues, equally engaged with the closely aligned Dynamic Systems Theory, to form the composite Complex Dynamic Systems Theory or CDST. When CDST researchers study second language development, they trace the patterns in a learner's developing language resources as the resources continuously emerge over time and are constructed in interactions with others. CDST treats learners as unique whole persons with many individual differences, rather than averaging out their differences. It also rejects a view of a language learner as passive. From a

CDST perspective, then, it is better to think in terms of learners perceiving and acting on affordances, or opportunities to learn, rather than their receiving input made comprehensible by others.

While some theorists argue that a theory that originates in the physical sciences is not applicable to the study of human learning, I believe that a theory that can explain a wide variety of phenomena is all the more powerful. Of course, when it comes to language learning, the system is human, and human systems include an agent or agents capable of exercising intentional actions. Though the theory is relatively new, there appears to be an ever-growing number of applied linguists and language teachers interested in its implications. An article I authored in 2017 listed 30 maxims that followed from entertaining language, its change, and development as complex dynamic systems.

Then, too, in this Anthropocene era, we are aware of the many serious global problems with which we must contend. A holistic, non-reductionist theory, such as complexity theory, may prove invaluable, especially when its practitioners adopt an inquiry-driven approach, one that is not restricted by disciplinary boundaries. In short, to me, complexity theory has revealed properties of the world that are not only evident but also profound. Whether its impact will remain relevant in the future, I cannot say; however, due to its ecological nature, for now, I consider it a theory for our time.

9. As we are speaking/writing (2023), we witness two main emerging challenges in our field of applied linguistics and language education: first, the post-covid-19 era and the changes we have made or need to make in language teaching, and second, the ongoing discussion of artificial intelligence (e.g., ChatGPT) in language teaching/education. How do you perceive these two phenomena's impact on language learning and teaching/education? Should language teachers/educators be worried (about being replaced by AI/ChatGPT etc.)?

The pandemic and what ensued for teaching was monumental. It required many teachers to change the way they worked overnight—sometimes with little training in teaching online. I think it is fair to say that most teachers rose to the challenge and were appreciated as never before by parents of school children, at least.

The familiarity that online instruction has engendered may also have increased the popularity of web-based language instruction programs such as Duolingo, Rosetta Stone, and Babbel. While we should be grateful that these programs encourage more people to study another language, we should be wary of how language is conceived in such programs. Language use requires adaptability that accompanies interaction, not simply the learning of words and simple constructions.

As for AI, undoubtedly, it, too, will have a large impact. It already has in some ways, for instance, by making teachers rethink the classic assignment of having their students write compositions. This is because the identity of the composition author (human or AI) is increasingly difficult to discern. While some language teachers have already used AI to complement their classroom instruction, others are still trying to figure out how to harness this resource (and even to keep up with the next generation's comfort with such). One future

possibility is that education will go the way personalized medicine has, by mining Big Data to tailor instruction for particular learners or groups of learners.

Of course, we also need to contend with the concern of some “insiders” that AI be regulated for the sake of humankind. Some progress is being made toward regulation, most recently by the European Union through its adoption of the AI Act.

It is difficult to say where this will lead, but AI is likely to transform language and its learning and teaching, not to mention its use in ways that are impossible to imagine presently.

For the immediate and perhaps distal future, I would hope and expect that online instruction and AI would not replace teachers or classroom instruction, but would rather complement them. Indeed, in the hands of a skillful and knowledgeable teacher, these resources can encourage our classroom walls to become more permeable bringing to our and our students’ attention language exemplars and puzzles as they occur in the “real-world.”

However, there is a big difference between having an experience and learning from it. It is one thing for our students to encounter and even engage in language practices via social media and outside of the classroom; it is another to learn from them. It has always been, and perhaps never before appreciated more than now, that we should be teaching students how to learn from their experiences—indeed teaching learning as much or more than teaching language. What is needed is something I have called “learning-centered” teaching.

10. In your opinion, is there a gap between (SLA) research and L2 classroom practice? In other words, between researchers and teachers? How can we fill this perceived gap between them? Some scholars argue that some journal articles are far too complex and technical to be understandable and useful for mainstream teachers, do you agree with this?

The gap between researchers and teachers is often discussed, usually despairingly or even accusingly. However, like other dichotomies, this one is not simple. For one thing, researchers are usually teachers, too. At the same time, while perhaps not conducting research in the way that the term is usually interpreted, teachers who reflect on how a lesson has gone, make adjustments and teach the lesson differently the next time, embody not only the spirit of research but the actual process itself.

Of course, the social valuing of the two activities is disparate, and they are in some ways ensconced in different cultures. While it is easy to point to the differences, this is not to say that teachers should ignore research findings any more than researchers should ignore teachers. As for the latter, there is a strand of SLA research called ISLA, or Instructed SLA. While its research agenda would not be one of my choosing (because I have advocated for its agenda to be constructed from teachers’ questions, ones that take into account the complex reality of the classroom), it is nevertheless true that ISLA researchers are committed to improving instruction.

Perhaps, the most important contribution of research is to encourage teachers to experiment with new practices and to help them make the tacit explicit by cultivating new ways of talking about their practice. By the same token, teachers’ propensity for retrodiction rather than prediction can be useful for researchers, and furthermore, teachers’ intimate knowledge of the local context can be extremely valuable for researchers.

As for journal articles being complex and technical, it should be remembered that many journal articles are written to relate findings to a particular audience, not to intentionally obfuscate. A helpful step now taking place with journals like *Language Learning* is that they are making accessible summaries of research articles, using non-technical language, so that teachers might benefit from research findings. (The summaries have also been made available through Oasis [<https://oasis-database.org>]).

11. How do you see the future of language teaching (say in ten years)? What are the potential new venues which merit further investigation?

To continue the thread of my answer to your previous question, it is my hope that researchers and teachers come to acknowledge if they have not done so before, the agency of learners. Learners are not passive consumers of input, but rather they navigate their own unique developmental learning trajectories. Teachers who recognize this, and incorporate “enabling conditions” into their lessons will help learners to enact their agency.

In addition, in the future, both researchers and teachers need to better understand how learning takes place extramurally and how to build on this learning foundation to encourage students to adopt attitudes of inquiry, using methodological practices such as project-based learning.

12. When you reflect on your professional life over the decades, is there anything you would have changed if it were possible to start all over again?

I feel that I have been truly fortunate. The truth is that were I to start over again, I would find it impossible to keep up with developments in all three of my interests because they have grown so rapidly. I am also aware of the privilege of my birth. Had I been born in another place or time, I would not necessarily have had the opportunities that I have enjoyed.

But, if I could change one thing, I wish that I had spent an extra day in the many places that I visited professionally. Colleagues were generous in sharing their homes and culture, and I would always promise myself to return when there was more time. The problem is that time was the enemy.

The balance between having a productive career in academia and having a contented family life has been difficult to achieve. At times, I wished for more time for myself—but I have been truly fortunate in leading the rich life that I have.

13. If we could have only five books or research papers on our bookshelf as young researchers entering the field of language teaching and learning, which ones would you recommend us to read?

There is nothing like handbooks to give those entering the field an overview and an introduction to historical and contemporary theories and practices. In addition, most handbooks include sections of recommended readings, which afford readers the opportunity who wish to delve further into relevant topics to do so.

14. If you wish to share your lifelong experience with early-career teachers and researchers, what would you recommend? [if you wish to write your answer on a page with your handwriting, we will copy the screenshot here instead of typing your answer; it could be a great keepsake for academia as well]

Wherever I go in the world, I am asked, “What is new?” Teaching is hard work; it is understandable why teachers are eager to learn new ways—ways that may make the workload easier and the outcomes more rewarding. Of course, many teachers are satisfied with their tried and true practices, and there is nothing wrong with them unless failure to change leads to burnout. I do not think that teachers must always embrace what is new. On the other hand, I would hope that teachers are not afraid to experiment, to try new things, and to share with others what they have learned—to be persuasive about their own ideas but to be respectful of others’ views. It is from such exchanges that we continue to learn and to grow, individually and collectively.

Also, I would hope that teachers would help their students enact their agency in shaping both their personal and their professional lives. If teachers do so skillfully, students will be able to connect, adapt, and flourish in a dynamic and fast-changing world. We will need what they learn in order to face and deal with the global issues that confront us all.

15. Would you mind sharing with us your current life (academic or general) and your future plans?

Well, I am officially retired, but I continue to remain professionally active, and I would not wish it to be otherwise. I remain fascinated with the questions that brought me into the field, and I continue to explore and deepen my understanding of language, its learning, and its teaching—learning from and with others.

At the same time, I have been able to spend fulfilling moments with my family, particularly finding great joy in my grandchildren—and speaking of learning from others—I receive the children’s lessons regularly.

My husband and I have also taken up the hobby of birding, as did others during the height of the pandemic. And, while I have no intention of keeping a life list, it is satisfying to cultivate my attention, awareness, and perception as my knowledge of even common birds grows. This new passion has also helped us renew personal relationships as well.

Some years ago, I wrote about my development as a teacher. I identified three “stages”: Learning to teach, learning teaching, and simply learning. I continue to be in the third stage and I wish it to be ever so.

I sincerely thank you for this opportunity to reflect on my rich and privileged career.

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Acknowledgements

Not applicable.

Funding

Not applicable.

Ethics Declarations

Competing Interests

No, there are no conflicting interests.

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