

## *Applying Theories in Language Programs*

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### **Introduction**

Language teaching and learning is complicated (e.g., in terms of expectations or work responsibilities) and complex, with different dimensions of discourses, agendas, and political/social actors involved; unpredictability; diversities; and now perhaps more than ever, generalized political climate. (Clark) We are all looking for the applied theories and related techniques that will help us expand our ideas and convictions in complex and interconnected ways. We also look for what can help us with the complications of our day-to-day curricular development and teaching practices in terms of activities, genres, texts, and so on. In addition, we are challenged to better address the diversity of our students by moving beyond, across, or in-between some of the national, cultural, regional, social, and again political borders in our everyday lives. (Clark) In this contribution, I will critically explore some of the conditions involved in learning and teaching as well as the paradoxes that come from the theoretical questions, methods, categories, and perspectives our profession has offered us over the last several decades. (de Certeau, 1984 Cited in (Clark)).

The Douglas Fir Group (D. F. Group) and others have invited us to consider that the ideas around multiple theoretical approaches and transdisciplinarity involve bringing together many disciplinary perspectives through collaboration with researchers and language educators from different areas of Instructed Second Language Acquisition (ISLA). We accomplish this to be able to work on 'real world' issues in 'real world' contexts. (*ibid* p. 5). This work includes, of

course, theoretical arguments and pedagogies that help us make decisions about our curricula and classroom practices that apply to “different disciplines and different kinds of meaning making rather than attending only to static linguistic systems, isolated vocabulary, and rules of grammar” (Clark, citing (Canagarajah); (Kramersch)). We are working here with “...the recognition that no singular theory of learning, nor of language, is sufficient to provide an adequate account of the complex phenomenon of second language learning, particularly in the context of increasing linguistic and cultural diversity” (Scarino and Liddicoat).

The discussion will proceed with a very short overview of prevalent theories of ISLA generally. Then I will add a contrastive look in more depth at only two “theories” and their possible applications in language programs. I will emphasize some of the discussions in our profession concerning processing instruction, e.g. (VanPatten "Processing Instruction") or VanPatten ("Why Explicit Knowledge Cannot Become Implicit Knowledge" ), and the multiliteracies framework, e.g. (Paesani, Allen and Dupuy). I will conclude with an invitation to a set of questions we might pose to any theory, framework, or approach as we consider its efficacy and applications for our own specific contexts.

### **Overview of Several ISLA Theories**

Our topic for this overview, then, in front of the larger background just outlined, is about applying theories in language programs. As a reminder, it's first important to ask ourselves the perennial question: what's a theory, anyway? It is a more-or-less abstract set of claims with the goal of explaining (more than describing) the significant aspects of, for our purposes, instructed second language learning and teaching and the relationships among various characteristics that the theorists have chosen to focus on. By implication, then, something will always be left out of focus in any theory. As Mitchell, Myles and Marsden (remind us, we may have a focus that is on

a property theory, primarily concerned with modeling the nature of a particular language system, or on a transition theory that is focused on modeling the change and developmental processes in language learning or acquisition (Mitchell, Myles and Marsden). Helpful theories are most often developed collaboratively, and they evolve through systematic inquiry, where their claims are tested or modified by holding them to evidence produced by data, hypothesis testing, or ecological approaches to analysis and interpretation of data—in other words, through one or more of a variety of research methods appropriate for our field of SLA.

We can't forget, either, the most prolific and prevalent type of theory, namely every individual's personal theory, based on personal thinking and experience. These personal theories are most likely then partially or fully applied in a specific context, in combination with research of any of a variety of sources and types, including daily, informal action research. Individual or personal theories are what each of us walks into a classroom with every day, and/or develops curriculum based on them. We apply these theories whether, or not, we're aware that those theories are in alignment with or contradiction to the theoretical focal points we were taught or have thought, often with great conviction, that we had embraced.

With a title like the one here, it would be possible to give pros and/or cons of the many very important and helpful theories upon which our profession has grown and in many ways prospered over the last thirty-five years or more. For the purposes of this contribution, though, that would simply be too much information. I'm therefore choosing to give a very quick and general overview of the richness of many of the theories in our field of ISLA, then go into a bit more depth on the two fruitful developments I've mentioned. Then, in closing, I'll offer a few ideas about how to sort and titrate all these with our own personal theories, our individualized and real-world contexts, and the vast choices and constraints concerning what might be realistic

in our classrooms and curricula. Again, the hope is that we can embrace the richness of multiple disciplinary perspectives through collaboration among researchers and language educators from different areas of ISLA.

As we know from our profession, and as thoroughly described and documented as one example in Mitchel, Myles, and Marsden and the many sources cited there, we have moved through behaviorism, the morpheme studies, and of course then Krashen's Monitor model. That model, as we know, included the natural order hypothesis, differentiated between acquisition and learning, gave us the often very useful affective filter hypothesis, and the input hypothesis. The input hypothesis launched a tradition of empirical research and theorizing that, as many have pointed out, continues in an energized way up to the present.

Because Krashen's theory privileges acquisition over learning, *comprehensible input* that is designed to be linguistically just beyond the learner's level of competence ( $i+1$ ) is seen as the necessary and sufficient condition for acquisition. As a result of unconscious operations, Krashen argued that acquisition takes place in predictable developmental sequences that cannot be altered by direct teaching. Some form of communicative language teaching (CLT), which is derived from Krashen's work, has become the dominant approach to language teaching in many contexts (Leung and Scarino)<sup>1</sup>.

This approach emphasizes communication over learning as the dominant process through which language capability is developed. In CLT, the act of teaching has largely been seen as providing input; that is, "...teachers support learning by providing a language model that learners can use to develop their own hypotheses about language forms" (Scarino and Liddicoat). We'll go into

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<sup>1</sup> See also (VanPatten "Why Explicit Knowledge Cannot Become Implicit Knowledge").

more depth about the further developments and implications of these ideas below.

Along the way, then, pidginization and the acculturation model came on the scene. Soon many models and emergent theories were then overshadowed in many ways by the impact of Chomskyan linguistics, which gave birth to an extensive research program as well. Information processing, the interaction hypothesis, and the output hypothesis followed. All these approaches, and the research connected to them, can also be further categorized. Often we sort out the specific areas of the vast complications and complexities of ISLA into various focal points of the related research agendas. We looked at, and still do, language specific areas, cognitive and now also neuro-cognitive aspects, the role of the first language, and of course the role of psychological variables such as motivation, personality, language aptitude, or working memory. Social and socio-cultural theories, advances in processing theories, as well as concepts relating to identities or to ecological, multilingual, and environmental factors are increasingly important. The role of input, especially of input processing, and the relationships among input variables and internal, social, or psychological variables are still of increasing interest. Sociocultural theories of language learning, for example Lantolf and Poehner, Lantolf and Thorne, and van Lier take into account a relationship between thinking and the wider social, cultural, historical, and institutional context in which learning occurs (Lantolf and Poehner; Lantolf and Thorne; van Lier). Social interaction of all kinds is seen as the most important process through which learning occurs, and the cognitive and the social are seen not as different or dualistic but rather that each forms and contributes to the other (Lantolf and Poehner). Learning occurs through interaction with more knowledgeable others. Liddicoat and Scarino (characterized the cognitivist and sociocultural approaches to learning in SLA as families of theories. Along with them, I'd emphasize that "...we acknowledge the diversity of views within each framework and also

emphasize the fundamental differences that exist between them” (Scarino and Liddicoat).

After this brief and certainly incomplete overview, I’d like to turn now in some more detail to recent discussions and the joining of theory and practice in those discussions about processing instruction on one hand, and the multiliteracies framework on another. My guiding question for this segment is, to repeat, this: what can these theories and their applications do to enhance our approaches to ‘real world’ issues in ‘real world’ contexts and classrooms? (Clark, p. 5).

### **Processing Instruction**

Processing instruction (VanPatten "Processing Instruction") has gained increasing interest for at least 20 years now. The interest has given rise to an active research agenda. The overall research question involved is whether positive results documented in one specific context could be generalizable to other or even all structures in various languages. That is of course a very big question, and we don’t yet have a definitive answer to it. Other related research questions include the extent to which explicit processing information and feedback play significant roles in learning outcomes, or what the long-term effects of explicit processing information and feedback for learners might be. Processing instruction has also been investigated in the larger contexts of focus-on-form, of comparative or contrastive pedagogical interventions, and technology-enhanced language learning. Processing instruction is based, according to the primary researcher in or “father” of this field, Bill VanPatten, on psycholinguistic processes occurring during learner comprehension of L2 input. This intervention focuses on real-time input processing and the ways in which learners make form-meaning connections as they strive to comprehend L2 input. Input processing is focused on how learners “derive intake from input regardless of the language being learned and regardless of the context. Intake is ‘the linguistic data actually processed from

the input and held in working memory for further processing” (VanPatten "Processing Instruction"). In this view, learners will process input for meaning before they process it for form, and for most learners and for many languages, words are the main source of meaning (often leaving out form, even though form contributes greatly to overall sentence meaning). Of course, learners can also process meaning incorrectly or not at all. So, research about input processing in general works to describe what linguistic data in the input get processed during comprehension and which do not (VanPatten "Processing Instruction"). What learners process, in turn, is not all intake, and what learners derive as intake is not all incorporated into them as acquisition/learning (p. 272). The salient characteristic of processing instruction, then, is that “it uses a particular type of input to push learners away from nonoptimal processing strategies...” (*ibid.*). The point is to help learners make form-meaning connections during input processing—it is a type of explicit instruction with a focus on form that can include input enhancement but does not ask the learners to produce the target forms. Learners are shown information about a linguistic structure or form, they’re told about a strategy that might support them, or help them avoid mistakes, as they process the form for comprehension, and they are given manipulated or structured input so that the learners become dependent on form and structure to get meaning. In other words, they are pulled away from their natural processing tendencies toward seemingly more optimal strategies. Processing instruction bases its work, and some of the research to support that work, not necessarily on what is a problem form or structure in L2 but more on why it is a problem in terms of the theory and practice of input processing. Expanded research approaches have found some evidence that the effects of processing instruction can be found in communicatively oriented tasks such as video narration. It is perhaps one of very few applications of theory to practice that is grounded in an attempt to analyze and then apply the

learning and processing mechanisms that come into play during comprehension. VanPatten, quoted in Russell, stressed that processing instruction is a pedagogical technique, based on input processing theory with a large body of supporting research, that is not meant to be used every day. He noted that communicative classrooms are not supposed to focus exclusively on target language grammar; rather, processing instruction should be “parachuted in” as needed to help learners overcome flawed input processing strategies.

### **A Multiliteracies Framework for ISLA**

As this final comment shows, processing instruction and its theoretical and research base in input processing, has a particular, and at times constricted, focus. In contrast, we turn now to a multiliteracies framework for ISLA. In processing instruction, just as for

...research on most aspects of language (e.g., syntax, pronunciation, vocabulary, and to some extent pragmatics), the work tends to reflect a focus on an autonomous system, rather than foregrounding language users and their language use. In much thinking about languages as objects of learning, languages have been understood as separate entities that are to be kept apart as much as possible in language learning.... This means that learners’ languages are not considered so much as a repertoire of communicative capabilities that mutually influence each other in developing learners’ communicative capabilities, but rather as competing systems ... that give rise to errors through transfer or interference (e.g., Selinker, 1972). (Scarino and Liddicoat).

As mentioned earlier, instruction in L2 in the U.S. context is most generally organized around principles of communicative language teaching. If those rare and wonderful students who actually begin our language programs stick with us beyond possible requirements, their advanced literature or culture courses, perhaps even their advanced language or writing courses, often have



little consistency or theoretical underpinnings for the instruction. The challenge taken up by those who are supportive of a multiliteracies framework or even a transdisciplinary approach to language learning and teaching is this: to develop broader and more coherent curricula, instructional approaches, and assessment practices (Paesani, Allen and Dupuy). Developing these will also aid, it is hoped, in developing learners' translingual and transcultural competencies. That is, the desire is to help students develop abilities in both advanced-level language competencies as well as abilities to operate between or among languages and cultures. The hope is also, as mentioned by Kern ("Literacy as a New Organizing Principle for Foreign Language Education" to find a way to narrow the pedagogical gap between early levels of language teaching and what we do at the advanced levels, moving from teaching general communication with varying expectations for accuracy and fluency to teaching textual analysis in the target language. The latter is an extension that hopes for no less than preparing FL learners to participate in diverse discourse communities both at home, in online communities, and perhaps in multilingual or dominantly monolingual "target" communities. (Kern (*Literacy and Language Teaching* , p. 6)

The multiliteracies framework also has the goal of presenting "pedagogical strategies for integrating the study of language and literary-cultural content at lower levels, since most of our teaching as a profession is tied to introductory and intermediate level language courses" (Paesani, Allen and Dupuy). Those who are developing theory and practice for this framework have pointed out that learners can't usually develop L2 communicative abilities for academic settings without a commitment to the study of written communication and learning the "literate sensibilities" (Kern "Literacy as a New Organizing Principle for Foreign Language Education") that include many cultural premises underlying all communication in specific sociocultural

contexts—see also Lantolf and Thorne to this point. Key to the framework is the focus on multiple text types—hence the term *multiliteracies* (N. L. Group). “The New London Group (1996) argues that —to be relevant, learning processes need to recruit, rather than attempt to ignore and erase, the different subjectivities, interests, intentions, commitments, and purposes that students bring to learning.” They must also respond to the different media and modes in which students operate (Boche):

...linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, spatial, and multimodal – to learn and communicate.  
... What *is* new ... is how technology, like the multimodality of the Internet, brings these literacies and people together. Online social networking promotes flexibility with various types of (often collaborative) communications, such as YouTube, Vimeo, Twitter, Facebook, wikis, and so on.” (Robertson)

The term *multiliteracies* has also expanded to include “...multiple ways of engaging in communication across communities and cultures through a variety of language forms ...to represent meanings linguistically, visually, spatially, digitally, multimodally, or otherwise” (Paesani, Allen and Dupuy). These same authors present the structures of their framework to include articulating coherent learning objectives and goals to rethink curriculum and daily teaching to align with multiliteracies as an approach. Grammar and vocabulary are important, and are two among many linguistic, cultural, and social resources that learners can draw on to understand and create texts. Scaffolding to and from texts to oral language use is a focus, as are reading as constructing meaning from texts and writing as designing meaning through texts. Important and very useful discussions in this framework include video-mediated listening as a way of constructing meaning from texts, as well as working with digital literacies by a focus on

constructing meaning in Web 2.0 and beyond<sup>2</sup>. The multiliteracy framework breaks down into four segments: situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice. However, the segments are by no means intended to be rigidly applied in any specific order, as these practices are all parts of a whole. When all of the segments are employed in combination, the goal is that learners will become further encouraged to develop their own critical thinking and problem-solving skills in multilingual contexts, and thus they will be able to focus their learning styles in a more beneficial and constructive way (Robertson).

Research endeavors for this framework have been pursued in the last several years. The research base so far is primarily focused on sustainable practices for teachers in the form of multiliteracies pedagogies. One extensive study was developed in response to the research problem of language teacher attrition for FSL and ESL teachers (Douce-Vanthuyne). Pre- and in-service teachers responded to extensive questionnaires. Statistical analyses of the 145 subjects' responses revealed low and infrequent use of technologies for teaching and learning, as well as infrequent encouragement of multicultural or multiliteracy strategies by mentors.

The author concludes that

...[in these times of] continued immigration and globalization, ... teachers encounter multiculturalism and multilingualism [daily].[She points to the] ... increased need to educate ...for cultural and linguistic diversity. In addition, the role that technology plays for ... students in their home and school literacy practices calls for a pedagogical approach where diversity is seen as a resource, and technology as a means to enhance, engage, and equip students to be successful learners. Since multiliteracies pedagogies involve a wide repertoire of strategies (i.e. overt instruction, situated practice, critical framing, and transformed practice) and include multimodal representations (oral, visual,

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<sup>2</sup> All of the above summarized from (Paesani, Allen and Dupuy).

gestural, tactile, and spatial patterns) (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012), this could offer sustainable ways [for teachers and curriculum developers] ... facing similar demands to better meet the needs of their students and teachers (Douce-Vanthuyne).

Many studies related to multiliteracies frameworks have been accomplished in the last 5-7 years by researchers affiliated with CARLA, the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition at the University of Minnesota. These are theoretical and applied studies that are directly applicable to programs at various levels for ISLA. The studies demonstrate a need for more work concerning the applications of multiliteracies pedagogies. It remains important for all of us to develop and accomplish research that continues applications of theory to practice that are grounded in an attempt to analyze and then apply the learning and processing mechanisms that come into play in multiliteracies contexts.

### **What We Ask Ourselves: Choosing Theories and their Applications**

A final short segment here is to conclude with an invitation to a set of questions we might pose to any theory, framework, or approach as we consider its efficacy and applications for our own specific contexts. Applying theories to classroom and curricular practice, from the personal, individual theory to the larger and broader forms we have been reviewing, can also be seen as an educational narrative for ISLA. Neil Postman claimed that education is always grounded in narrative that “tells of origins and envisions a future, ...constructs ideals, prescribes rules of conduct, provides a source of authority, and ...gives a sense of continuity and purpose.” Ergas has added that, “These narratives are structures of meaning that guide our behaviors, allow us to plan our lives ahead, and make sense of what we do not (or do not) in order to get there.” If we are in the process, consciously or not, of finding the best narrative, the best structure of meaning for our classroom or curricular work in ISLA, we can consider all that our profession tells us—

all the stories, all the narratives, all the theories and pedagogies. The Douglas Fir Group, (2016), in an article entitled “A Transdisciplinary Framework for SLA in a Multilingual World,” tells us, and I agree, that all theories are held to be valid for particular purposes, and there are three ways to view the multiplicity of theories, or as I’m slightly reframing it here, the multiple layers of richness in our theoretical narratives. In one view, the field is characterized by theoretical diversity, but the theoretical positions remain largely unmodified. The second approach is a form of “...epistemic hybridization, in which aspects of each theoretical position are drawn on to create a new composite theory. The third approach is a theoretical response that positions SLA theory in a larger field of scientific endeavor by viewing language learning as a particular instance of a wider, adaptive system.”

It is up to each of us to sort out these larger questions, along with finding the best fit and coherence with our own personal theories, experiences, and narratives. One set of dimensions with which to gauge our sorting activities and to help us embrace a set of theories, adaptive systems, applications, and research paradigms, could be the following, which I have adapted from Lin, Oxford, and Culham. We need to think about what **ontology**, or our best understanding of reality, works best for us—I for example, (along with many others) consider my reality and the phenomena in it to be multidimensional, interconnected, and interdependent. We need to think about **epistemology**—ways of knowing. I, and again many others, choose to embrace an epistemology that integrates knowing from outer sources as well as from internal sources. The outer sources are those of research of all kinds appropriate to our field of ISLA, and experience with learners and other teachers. The internal sources I refer to can include intuition and contemplative views that integrate our richness as human beings with bodies, minds, and emotions that affect our literacies, our socio-cultural and neuro-cognitive contexts,

and our languages in use. Another dimension that can be helpful to sort out our educational narratives and even our research paradigms, is to think about **axiology**: what for each of us is valued, good, and even ethical for our place, time, personal, and/or political contexts, and what fits with our preferences for ways of knowing? **Methodology** is a classic focus for our profession, of course, and has been a major focus in this contribution: how do we approach teaching and learning narratives generally, and those for our own contexts of ISLA specifically, through systematic applications and inquiry? A final, and in ways perhaps most obvious dimension for us is **teleology**, or an explanation of the goal or ends for which knowledge and skill, in the languages, in the framework, in research, in the classroom, or in the curriculum, are applied. This level of questioning and establishing our best narrative reaches all the way to the goal of enhancing intercultural understanding or improving our sociocultural networks in these complex political times. With this view and with some thought given to these five dimensions of our ISLA educational narrative, for each of us and as a profession in general, we can discern the relevance, need, and best fit of applied theory to ISLA for ourselves, our students, our classrooms and curricula, and for the profession as a whole.

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