Learning and Teaching English: Insight From Research

Editors:
Luciana Pedrazzini, Andrea Nava

Publisher:
Polimetrica, 2012

ISBN:
978-88-7699-231-5

Pages:
354

The volume *Learning and Teaching English: Insights From Research*, edited by Luciana Pedrazzini and Andrea Nava, offers a comprehensive and valuable contribution to an integrated approach to second language acquisition (SLA), corpus linguistics and language teaching. The papers concerning the three different but interrelated areas contribute to opening up perspectives on how they can be fruitfully combined in applied linguistics (AL), both from a theoretical and a practical, language classroom point of view, thus benefiting all agents involved – researchers, teacher trainers, teachers and learners. As the editors highlight in the introduction entitled "Taking Stock of Research in Applied Linguistics: Implications for Second Language Pedagogy," the volume intends to shed light on current AL research from different European perspectives in the fields of SLA, corpus linguistics and language teaching. These broad areas correspond to the three sections into which the volume is organized, each containing papers "by European researchers investigating the contents, the processes and the tools of language learning and language teaching through different methodological approaches" (p. 10).

The first section, "Second Language Acquisition Research," opens with V. Cook's "Some Issues for SLA Research," where the author analyses five issues central to SLA research: interlanguage, characteristics of L2 learners, and the acquisition of vocabulary, grammar, and writing. It is shown how interlanguage cannot be considered in defective-only terms, but rather as including L2 users "distinctive qualities in their own right independent of monolinguals" (p. 42) and of native speakers. Cook discusses the concept of multicompetence, showing that L2 users think, and use the languages in their repertoires, in ways that are different from those of monolinguals, displaying increased language awareness and greater effectiveness in their L1, too. The author also problematizes the notion of "the earlier, the better," not least in connection to native-like-set proficiency attainment targets. Indeed, in our contemporary societies multilingualism and multilingual children increasingly represent the norm rather than an exception: "A second language is not an afterthought but a core element of human existence" (p. 63). This complexity ought to be dealt with by integrating SLA perspectives with those of language teaching, linguistics and psychology.

In "Researching Grammar Learning Strategies: State of the Art," M. Pawlak provides a comprehensive overview of research concerning language learning strategies, with particular reference to those related to grammar learning (GLS), a field which has recently seen a lively research interest in Poland, too. The author puts forward a comprehensive taxonomy to investigate GLS, which include metacognitive, affective, social and cognitive strategies; cognitive strategies are further subdivided into four subgroups: those "aiding the production and comprehension of grammar in communication tasks," "employed in developing explicit knowledge of grammar," "employed in developing implicit knowledge of grammar" and "applied in dealing with corrective feedback" (pp. 79-80). Findings from the author's study suggest that several variables are at work in GLS use, at times in contrasting ways. This points to the need for further investigation in this area, highly relevant in language teaching, particularly "with respect to the performance of specific tasks focusing on learning and using grammatical structures" (p. 87), communicative tasks in the first place.

A. Nava's contribution "'SLA in Action': Raising Teachers' Awareness of English Lexicogrammar and its Acquisition" focuses on the complex interrelation between SLA research and second language pedagogy and practice. Drawing on findings from the "SLA in Action" research project, a model is set forth and it is arguably suggested that classroom researchers and teacher trainers play a pivotal role in connecting research and practice. The concept of KAL ("knowledge about language and language learning," p. 91) appears central in fostering teachers' ability to interrelate these dimensions both with "a declarative and procedural dimension" (p. 92) and with SLA tenets and pedagogi-

cal classroom practices. Awareness of KAL seems to have been so far largely neglected in teacher training courses in Italy; the approach proposed by the author, together with a teacher training package for pre-service and in-service courses, are thus very much welcome. The proposal combines experiential learning, reflection, restructuring and planning, of which the sample module at the end of the chapter indeed provides a valuable illustration. The same perspective is taken by L. Pedrazzini in her contribution "SLA Properties From Practice: The Input Hypothesis." After an exhaustive overview section on input in SLA approaches and on Krashen's input hypothesis, the author discusses the implications of findings from her case study in teacher education terms. The need for a deeper interrelation between knowledge of SLA principles (Krashen's input hypothesis in this case) and consistent actual classroom practices clearly emerges as paramount, with SLA researchers and teacher educators playing an important mediating role.

The second section of the volume, "Corpus Linguistics Research," opens with L. Pinnavaia's contribution "Learning Idioms With Corpora: The Case of Food and Drink," dealing with the area of idiomatic expressions, which is often problematic for foreign language learners. The author discusses how corpora such as the BNC (British National Corpus) and the BoE (Bank of English) can constitute a valuable pedagogic resource in terms of real language performance. Possible patterns of idiom use and of their syntactic, semantic and pragmatic nature can be explored by means of corpora, and they can provide insights into the textual environment of idioms and their "real," nonstatic and foregrounding use, thus also making learning more memorable and eventually effective. In "How Bilingual Dictionaries Became More Learner-Friendly? A Study on Collocations in Three Editions of a Bilingual English-Italian Dictionary," B. Berti uses the BNC corpus and collocational dictionaries to examine ten English nouns, together with their Italian counterparts, in the semantic field of education. The author looks into their collocational patterns as represented in the three editions (1961, 1990, 2008) of the *Garzanti-Hazon* bilingual English-Italian dictionary. Her findings show that word collocations and their combinatorial properties have not always been fully taken into account, not least in pointing out differences between British and American varieties of English. Indeed, corpora can constitute a privileged source in the compilation of bilingual dictionaries, which represent a relevant reference and didactic tool in teaching and learning. M.T. Prat Zagrebelsky well complements the section on corpora offering a comprehensive view of their potential pedagogic advantages in "Using Corpora to Explore Language and Learner Language." The author points out that corpora can constitute a valuable teaching tool in several ways, from the exploration of "areas of language use not covered in a satisfactory way by grammars and dictionaries," to the creation of ad hoc corpora "to carry

out linguistic projects," as well as the compilation and analysis of "learner corpora in order to reflect on learner language" (p. 188). By illustrating three projects that can be carried out by teachers and students to explore and perceive the complex dynamics of "real language" use, the author convincingly shows how corpora such as the International Computer Archive of Modern and Medieval English Corpus Collection (ICAME), the International Corpus of English (ICE), the BNC, the BoE or the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE), as well as other freely available ones, can constitute invaluable classroom resources to investigate different aspects of language use. The same perspective is adopted by F. Meunier, who, in her contribution "Learner Corpora in the Classroom: A Useful and Sustainable Didactic Resource," illustrates how involving students in learner corpora can indeed facilitate positive, productive analysis and monitoring of their productions. The author, highlighting the need to foster teachers' awareness of the importance of making use of corpora in their practices, also provides practical suggestions to exploit learner corpora in pedagogic activities "as useful and sustainable didactic resources" (p. 214). Several among the resources available on the Internet to support teachers' engagement in taking on this type of approach are illustrated, too. A. Nava and L. Pedrazzini close this section with their contribution "Investigating L2 Spoken English Through the Role Play Learner Corpus." The authors describe an exploratory study carried out at the University of Milan looking into learners' awareness of spoken grammar features, and intended to highlight similarities and differences with native speakers in the use of tails and of discourse markers 'YES' and 'YEAH' in a learner corpus of role-play interactions. The authors discuss implications of their findings in terms of course syllabuses and activities, highlighting the "need for explicit teaching of spoken grammar in L2 curricula," particularly in relation to pragmatic competence (p. 245).

The last section, "Language Teaching Research," is introduced by M. C. Rizzardi in "*The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and its Implications for the Italian Language Teacher. Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice.*" The author digs into the manifold opportunities the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) can offer in planning effective language learning tasks and objectives, which do not seem as yet to have been fully exploited. A series of guidelines stemming from a research project with Italian teachers are put forward, aimed at encouraging language teachers to develop reflective and action-oriented pedagogic practices, not least in a *curricolo verticale* perspective to link aims, practices and outcomes between different school levels. Exemplificatory guidance grids are provided with thorough reflection on the process, where the CEFR constitutes a starting point in the development of learning outcomes, aims (tasks and texts) as well as competences and strategies. Indeed, the CEFR can represent a challenge for

language teachers; however, its "putting into action encourages the teachers to reflect on their daily decision-making practice from the learner's perspective and from the point of view of performance" (p. 276).

In "Language Issues in the CLIL Classroom: Focus on the Pupils" C. M. Coonan discusses a research project aimed at investigating learner foreign language production in CLIL classes in five high-school contexts. Findings show how communicative competence and collaborative negotiation of meaning appear to be characteristic features of CLIL lessons, above all of group work. Accuracy seems a problematic point, together with the difficulty for weaker learners to capitalise on the experience, and the ability to produce longer stretches of language. Synergy between language and subject teachers thus emerges as a fundamental issue in providing adequate methodological support while planning and carrying out CLIL-based activities, not least in tuning the teaching styles of the content and language subjects involved. Enhanced language learning and the development of language competence in the foreign language can be fostered by several factors, such as didactic modes involving student interaction, focus on form by the teacher, and the provision of language structures prior to lessons.

L. Mariani's contribution "Researching High School Students' Beliefs About Language Learning" discusses findings from a 612-participant research study carried out in Italian high schools. By relying on metaphor analysis, the research uncovered how assumptions and beliefs constitute a "hidden curriculum." The action-research orientation of the study allowed subsequent reflection on findings, benefiting the way in which teachers viewed "talking about learning and teaching," as well as their relationships with learners. The implications of findings can of course be related to the role played by motivational constructs: instrumental motivation emerges as internally-related ("the perception of the opportunities that knowing a language can offer," p. 326), and integrative motivation is a strong factor, sometimes connected to an unrealistic, idealized native speaker model. It is also noteworthy that "most students expressed a view of language as a tool for communication and a bridge to intercultural understanding" (p. 327).

The section closes with K. Doro's chapter "The Importance of Advanced L2 Vocabulary in Academic Contexts: A Hungarian Example." The contribution is related to first-year English university students in Hungary, with particular reference to issues such as vocabulary improvement, which are well explored in the introductory section. The academic language needs of advanced students of English attending English-medium higher education courses are then discussed, and key research issues which could be further explored in other contexts are highlighted.

The volume tackles a variety of topics, albeit all interrelated, within the fascinating, complex and ever-developing research fields covered in the three

sections. The different perspectives included provide a comprehensive, complementary and intermingling view of contributions made to SLA and language teaching in the different fields of enquiry. The practical implications for teacher education and classroom practices are always highlighted. One possible suggestion for improvement could be the inclusion of more overt references to the developing and vibrant field of English as a lingua franca (ELF) research, for instance to ELF corpora (VOICE[1] and ELFA[2]), to the problematization of SLA-related issues, as well as to the implications for language teaching (and learning); this could indeed complement the challenging issues presented in the volume, providing an additional and relevant perspective.

It is certainly worth mentioning that the volume stems from the Conference "Learning and Teaching English: What the Research in English Applied Linguistics Has to Say" organized by the University of Milan in April 2010, which was open both to researchers and teachers and thus constituted an extremely valuable opportunity to interrelate research in AL and SLA with classroom practices. To conclude, edited volume represents a stimulating and challenging opportunity for reflection on the significant and relevant contributions that diversified fields of enquiry can provide to integrate research, reflection and teaching practices. The interrelated perspectives emerging from the contributions in the volume constitute indeed a valuable tool, particularly in these challenging times, when foreign language education and all its agents – that is, researchers, teachers, teacher trainers and language learners alike – are faced with increasingly demanding educational tasks.

Reviewed by
Paola Vettorel
University of Verona, Italy
paola.vettorel@univr.it

---

[1] http://www.univie.ac.at/voice/
[2] http://www.helsinki.fi/englanti/elfa/elfacorpus