Interview With Dr. Bill VanPatten

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Bill VanPatten is a Professor of Spanish & Second Language Studies at Michigan State University. His research interests include parsing and processing, input processing, the interface between morphology and syntax, and instructed SLA. He is the author or co-author of 8 eight books and almost 100 articles. He has also authored Spanish and French language textbooks. This interview was conducted on March 19, 2012. For more information about Dr. VanPatten, please visit his website: https://sites.google.com/site/bvpsla/.

How did you first become interested in second language acquisition?

I became interested in second language acquisition during two distinct points in my life. I was raised in a bicultural bilingual family so I always had interest in people who knew more than one language. I had 55 cousins on my mother's side and in that group, that cohort, I think there were only three or four of us who spoke Spanish. We're all English dominant because we live in the United States but the rest of my cousins were so English dominant that they basically spoke no Spanish. Some understood to greater or lesser degrees but they didn't speak. So only three or four of us actually had fluency with the language. That interested me. I wanted to know why that was so... And then I got interested in more second language things when a friend of mine was working on a dissertation and asked me to teach in an experiment that she was running for her dissertation. That's where I first started learning about second language acquisition. It coincided with my first course on child language acquisition so it all came together at the same time.

Could you briefly describe the projects you're working on?

I just completed a major project on aptitude, actually grammatical sensitivity, and the processing part of processing instruction in four different languages. We're going to follow that up in two languages now with working memory as an individual difference. In another study we're working on a follow-up to a study that's coming out in June. It's a study on the relationship between syntax and morphology with verb-movement and person/number inflections on verbs. Our first study only focused on sensitivity to grammatical violations and we're following it up with a cross-sectional study where we're including a production measure because we want to see if there's any relationship between sensitivity to violations and productive ability with these things that we looked at in our first study. Then there's a study that a former student and I are wrapping up on Japanese as a second language on parametric variation with head directionality. We're both from the old school of parameters and we believe that some of these old parameters that have fallen to the wayside are still actually useable for talking about language acquisition. This

next year, another group of people and I have two studies in the works that are about anaphoric reference and antecedent choice for null and overt subject pronouns in Spanish. So I'll stop there. I have other ones but those are the main ones.

Over the years you have most certainly published a great deal. Which of your publications do you believe has had the greatest impact and why?

I can tell you something that a student of mine actually pointed out to me a month ago. If you go to the Studies in Second Language Acquisition (SSLA) website, my 1990 SSLA article and my 1993 SSLA article with Teresa Cadierno are two of most cited articles in SSLA ever. So I could probably say that those have had the most impact. One deals with the focus on content and form at the same time, that's the 1990 one and the 1993 one launched a whole agenda on processing instruction. I think the processing instruction one has had a lot of impact because it turned people on their heads when it came to thinking about the nature of instructed SLA. In fact, it still turns some people on their heads. It creates quite a stir because no matter what lip service people give to input, there's still a lot of people out there who just don't want to believe that input is the way you get language in your head.

How do you believe the field of SLA has changed over the years?

That's a tough one and I'm going to get politically incorrect, I'm sure [laughter]. I think it's changed in that it's become so multifaceted and so diffused that we no longer have a common research agenda. People have lost sight of the history of SLA and how we got started and what the fundamental questions are. You see a proliferation of theories now and some of this proliferation of theories is because of people looking at different things but thinking they're looking at the same things. So they fight and they argue about it and it's like arguing over... Let's say you're baking an apple pie and I'm baking a cherry pie. Even though we chose to bake different kinds of pies, we still argue about what's the best method for baking a pie. Obviously you don't bake an apple pie the same way you bake a cherry pie, but we still argue about it. And that's kind of what's happening in SLA. There are apples and cherries going on.

So what would you say are the challenges the field of SLA is facing today?

I think it's facing that challenge, the challenge of not bifurcation but multifurcation. It's so splintered that there's just not a lot of common ground anymore. Also, it's always faced a political challenge because SLA is a field, at least in the United States, that has been dependent a lot on literature departments and traditional language departments. I don't think that's the healthiest thing for SLA. So aside from its research agenda and theoretical orientation—the multifacetedness I was talking about before—I think it still faces a political challenge because SLA is always the thing that gets short-shrifted in colleges of arts and sciences.

As a final question, what advice do you have for second language researchers, especially those who wish to bridge the gap between theory and practice?

My advice is not to be in such a hurry to bridge the gap between theory and practice. I think that there's a myth in the field that somehow everything we do has to be related to practice or everything can be translated into practice and that's just not the case. I recommend you read a 1985 article published by Pasty Lightbown in Applied Linguistics called "Great expectations: Second-language acquisition research and classroom teaching" about the relationship between SLA theory research and practice. It's as relevant in 2012 as it was in 1985. I think that people are so big on the practice part they lose sight of the bigger picture, that there's so much that we don't know about SLA. Constantly trying to do practice makes us jump the gun. Look at my work on processing instruction. A lot of people do one or two studies and they're done. We've been doggedly working on processing instruction for years now in all kinds of ways, looking at different nooks and crannies and uncovering the variables and changing the testing method because I'm just not content with saying, "Here we've got some results therefore here's my opinion about how things happen." You need to constantly replicate, rethink your variables, go back and examine things and just not be so quick to jump on the practice wagon. The fact that we have so many theories of SLA should be a clue that you can't jump on the practice wagon right away. You've got to just do the groundwork and we're still doing the groundwork. How old is the field? If you count S. P.

Corder's 1967's publication "The significance of learners' errors" followed by Larry Selinker's 1972 "Interlanguage" paper, then about 45 or 40 years—that's not a very long time for a field to be in existence. So I think that we should just be patient. Just be patient.

Author's note: *I would like to thank Bill VanPatten for participating in this interview. His vibrant personality and vast knowledge of SLA makes every conversation with him a pleasure. I believe this interview gives a glimpse of the prolific amount of high-quality work Dr. VanPatten has published throughout the years and also provides valuable insight into the past and present of SLA.*

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