Interview with Kim McDonough

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Kim McDonough is an Associate Professor in Applied Linguistics at Concordia University. She earned her M.A. in TESOL from Michigan State University and her Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics from Georgetown University. Her research interests include psycholinguistic approaches to second language acquisition, classroom-based acquisition research, usage-based approaches to acquisition, and task-based language teaching. She delivered a keynote speech at the 2014 Second Language Studies Symposium titled *Using structural priming tasks in L2 classrooms,* and kindly spared some time for this interview after her keynote address.

Could you tell me about your life as an M.A. TESOL student at MSU?

It was a long time ago, from 1996 to 1998, and I had just come back from 4 years in Thailand, so I was having a little bit of culture shock to get used to American culture as opposed to Thai culture. But it was great. I started in the summer session, and I really enjoyed the M.A. program. I was really lucky to have a chance to do research as a research assistant with Charlene Polio, Sue Gass, and Allison Mackey. Then, when I realized that I really liked research, I wanted to go on to pursue a Ph.D., which wasn't my goal when I started the M.A. program. I just wanted to get an M.A. and go back to Thailand. I found out I loved research when I was doing my M.A.

Do you remember any fun things you experienced while studying at MSU?

While I was studying at MSU, most of the fun things came when I was a teaching assistant at the ELC. I loved all the fun things we had to do with students. For example, in the fall, we went to an apple farm and do the hayride. One summer, I rented a van and drove my students to Cedar

Point, where we spent the whole day, which was fun. Once, I almost got into trouble because we had an end-of-semester party, and I didn't realize that we can't drink on campus because I just came back from Thailand. So, all my students and I were drinking beer, and the police came. It was embarrassing. That was a bit of culture shock because in Thailand it would be okay at the end of the semester for an adult class.

How did you first become interested in the field and become an applied linguist?

That's because of teaching. My undergraduate degrees are in political science and studies in religion, so I went to Thailand and started teaching English there. That's how I got involved. So I really came to the field of applied linguistics through language teaching. I started to realize what I did well as a teacher, what I didn't, and how much I didn't know about how learning happened.

What motivated your particular interest in priming research and task-based language teaching?

That happened because of my

dissertation. My dissertation was on feedback and modified output. I found in my data that I frequently saw students, when they are interacting with each other to carry out my test, after they had received feedback, they would modify their output and then they would use the structure again, like two or three more questions, or one student started using a particular question type and their partner started using it. So I saw that in my data but I didn't know how to describe it in terms of any type of SLA or applied linguistics research because it hadn't been talked about. So I went digging around and found structural priming research in psycholinguistics, and then I said that's what's happening in my data. So that's how I got interested in priming research.

Could you briefly describe some recent research projects that you have conducted or supervised?

It's a priming study, and we are looking at relative clauses and prepositional phrases. It's a lab-based study. So what we would expect to find is that if you prefer prepositional phrases at the baseline, we can prime you for relative clauses and it has the positive impact on your subsequent production, but what we have included are some tests of working memory, statistical learning, and pattern detection. So right now we are correlating those test scores with the primed production to see if we see any relationships. And the other thing we have included was after the activities were all done, we asked them to rate certain sentence types in terms of how frequently they think the sentence types happened during the conversation. Because we were trying to get at, "Were they aware of the fact that there were so many relative clauses and prepositional phrases that the research was using?" And we also asked them explicitly if there is any type of grammar that they found to be very common in these conversations.

So what we wanted to see is if they had any awareness at any level of the fact that these two structures were prevalent in the conversation, but I don't know what's going on. My research assistants are coding the data right now. So you have to come to the conference to find out.

A body of psycholinguistic studies using priming methods has been conducted to provide practical implications for L2 teaching and learning. What do you think about the effectiveness of such attempts to fill the gap between theory and practice?

That's actually something that I have been thinking a lot about lately. I think I talked about this in this talk I just gave. I think a typical approach from any theory is that we have to do a large body of empirical research in the lab under tightly controlled conditions first. Only then should we move to the classroom setting. And sometimes I think it might be okay to have a more bottom-up approach. That is, we observe what is going on in the classroom first, and try to figure out how we can bring in the knowledge we have about SLA, interaction, task, or priming. Then, we can just see what happens. Even though each classroom we go into might be different, everything what we are doing is relevant in that classroom context. So it's hard to say what is better, whether to have a large body of relevant classroom-based research that we can then try to find common themes across or to have a large set of lab-based research with its greater control, and then try to apply that finding in the classroom context. I am not sure. I think we can go both ways. We often think that research has to begin in the lab, and the results are applied to the classroom, but I think we can go the other way as well.

Have you experienced any difficulties in applying some theoretical findings obtained from experimental settings to

authentic teaching or learning contexts?

Yeah. I think the reality is that the classroom often provides obstacles for a clear transfer of what you have done in a lab to what you can do in the classroom. There are so many more factors at play in a classroom. They are what the teacher believes as effective, what the teacher wants to do, what the administration believes as appropriate, whether or not there are certain standard competencies or tests that students are supposed to pass, students' beliefs about what's an effective use of class time, students' interests and willingness to engage in activities with each other, and the relevance of the activities to the curriculum. All of these factors come into play, which make things completely unexpected. We don't know what is going to happen. So there are a lot more factors that have to be taken into consideration. For example, when conducting a classroom-based study, I have had several teachers telling me, "I wouldn't use those tasks in my class." They sometimes just refused to use the task when I showed them the task before implementing a study. Then, I say, "Oh, okay. Let me make you another one."

Over the years you have explored the role of collaborative syntactic priming tasks in eliciting more advanced and accurate constructions. What do you think about the longitudinal influences of such priming influences on L2 learners' acquisition of target structures?

I think the influence of priming on second language acquisition depends on the target structure. If you are to see some longitudinally developmental progression of the form, you need to identify whether learners are prepared for the target form. Also, when you are trying to get second language learners to the next level of the structure, you need to use priming to push their development along. I think it is likely

to have a longer term effect that would not go back to the previous stage, so I think that can be useful. But if it is something more like you can say active or you can say passive, I am going to prime you to use passives. If they don't have to use passives later on, then they are not going to use them. It is kind of a manipulation of input. You are flooding them. It is almost like an input flood. I am flooding you with input, but I don't think that input flood is going to help because of the input. I think it is going to help you because of the output you produce in response to that input. So it is almost like the input is a means to the end to elicit the production. So I think it can have a long-lasting impact, but in other contexts, it might be fleeting simply because the structure you are priming them to produce is one that is restricted to a particular discourse context. So in the absence of that discourse context in the future, they have no need to use the structure.

As a professor and supervisor, what advice can you give for PhD students to be good researchers in this field?

Research what you love. It always makes me sad when Ph.D. students come and say, "What should I do for my dissertation?" So, it is like, "What are you interested in?" I could give you a topic. I could give you topics all day. I could sit here and give you 20 topics that I don't have time to investigate. No problem. Here you go. Here is your study. I can even give you the variables for you, but why? Why are you here? Why are you doing this? What are you going to do for the rest of your career? Would you call me every time you need to do a project? What are you interested in? You have to have some passion, some burning questions, something that will get you through the process of "It's 3 am, and I am sitting here doing stats. I can't get any findings, and I hate this. I will quit." I mean

you need a burning question or passionate desire to find an answer to a question that is going to get you through that. So that is my advice for one. And for two, don't try to do too much in the dissertation study. It is just one study. Don't be too greedy. Don't include too many variables. Just ask a really good question, and it is okay if it is just a simple question if it is a good question. Last, pick your supervisor well. Don't just pick based on expertise in the field. Pick one you can get along with. Is this someone that you really want to spend a lot of time with in his/her office for the next three years? So put together a team with people you feel comfortable with, you are happy talking to, and you are not intimidated by or uncomfortable around because that's not going to help you get done.

Before we end this interesting interview, is there anything you would like to add?

Thank you for having me back. It has been really fun. I haven't been here since I graduated, so it has been great. I know the weather has been bad, but apparently that's common everywhere. It is getting better. The sun just came out. Thank you for inviting me back. It's been fun.