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## Interview With Dr. Luke Plonsky

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Luke Plonsky is Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics at Northern Arizona University. His research interests include instructed second language acquisition, quantitative research methods with a specific focus on study designs, the use of statistics, research synthesis, and meta-analysis. He gave the keynote address at the Second Language Studies Symposium at Michigan State University. This interview was conducted on February 21, 2014. For more information about Dr. Plonsky, please visit his website:

<http://oak.ucc.nau.edu/ldp3/index.html> \

### **Could you tell us about how you first got involved in second language research?**

Probably like a lot of people, I started off getting interested in second language research as a second language learner. Then I got a lot more interested when I started teaching. At the time I was taking several courses in language teaching methods and SLA. I began to get curious and wanted to understand more about the second language learning process, how that could inform second language instruction and how we might be able to improve second language instruction via a better understanding of second language learning.

### **You are a very productive scholar in the field. Could you briefly describe the projects that you are currently working on?**

It is a fun question to think about. So, I have both substantively oriented and methodologically oriented projects. Right now, most of my research is methodologically oriented, but in the substantive domain, I have a study right now under review. It is a meta-analysis of pronunciation instruction. This is one of the few areas of L2 instruction that has not yet been meta-analyzed. Before getting

involved in the study, I did not know much about pronunciation instruction. I was invited to be a part of the project as the methodologist on the research team. As I got more involved in the project, I became more interested in the area. Other projects I have going on right now are mostly methodologically oriented. One example would be the synthesis of sampling practices that I talked about here this weekend. Sampling is important, among other reasons, for establishing generalizability across L2 research, yet we as a field do not pay much attention to it. I have another study in press that is looking at the distribution of effect sizes from primary and meta-analytic studies. The main point of the study is to help second language researchers better interpret and contextualize the effect they obtain. We, L2 researchers, have started to report effects sizes more and more but we are not doing anything with them. So, what is the point of reporting effect sizes if we are not going to use them in their full potential? We should use them in some meaningful ways to help interpret the results. I am also in the early stage of a project that looks at and describes data collection instrumentations in second language research. Specifically, I am looking at reliability. I have looked at the extent to

which reliability is reported before, but this study will be looking at actual/observed reliability across a wide sample of second language research. It is hard to know what good reliability is because right now we, L2 researchers, are basically guessing. In this study I will meta-analyze reliability coefficients to help us understand: what is good reliability, what is high, and what is low in relation to the rest of field. In addition, as in most meta-analyses, I also look at whether reliability estimates vary as a function of study or instrument features. For example, we might expect high reliability of larger samples or higher reliability with standardized tests compared to researcher-generated tests or teacher-generated tests. We may also get higher reliability with certain L2 skills. For instance, reading may produce higher reliability than listening. I am speculating now. We will see what types of study features might be associated with reliability as observed.

**Obviously, meta-analysis is one of your main research interests. As far as I know, the first examples of meta-analysis in our field are Norris and Ortega (2000), and Goldschneider and DeKeyser (2001). Meta-analysis is slowly finding its way into L2 research. As an expert in this area, could you give us some more information about the history of meta-analysis? What are the potential contributions of meta-analysis to our field?**

I think meta-analysis has a lot of potential as a way to bring together previous research in a way that is more systematic, more objective and quantitative, as opposed to traditional reviews of literature. So, whenever a researcher is interested in reviewing a set of studies in a given area, it could and should be an option. However, you have to be careful. I describe it as *more* objective and *more* systematic because it is not purely objective. A lot of researcher

judgment involved in meta-analysis and a lot of choices, just like in any study. So, there is therefore room for error and biases but less. In addition, the reviewer's expertise is never removed from the process. The reviewer's expertise is actually essential at all steps in the process. For example, it is essential to defining the domain, developing the coding scheme, and interpreting the results, because only an expert in the area would know what items are worth coding for. I would also add that the potential of meta-analysis to inform L2 research is perhaps less retrospective but more prospective. What I mean is that a good meta-analysis, in my opinion, is not the one that simply summarizes previous research but the one that takes that research and perspective, and uses it to push forward future research. A good meta-analysis does not seek to close doors. In fact, it opens up new ones because it shows us which areas still need further research. And just as importantly, a good meta-analysis is also able to comment on and make empirically based suggestions for areas for improvement of the domain in question. A young field like ours need meta-analyses that look back, yes, but that also move us forward.

**What are the best journals to submit meta-analysis studies? Do you have any suggestions for research synthesists and meta-analysts?**

Well, it is a difficult question. I think it depends on the focus of the study. *Language Learning* has perhaps the strongest culture or tradition of publishing systematic syntheses such as meta-analyses, and some of the best meta-analyses in the field have certainly appeared there. However, narrower or focused meta-analyses, what you might call '*local meta-analyses*', such as CALL research, might not have this much of an audience and might be a better fit for CALL-oriented journals. So, it depends on the topic and the scope of the study, I

would say. There is value in these really broad types of studies. But, again, I also see value in more focused meta-analyses such as Lyster and Saito (2010). Even though the domain of the paper is narrow, it still has a lot to say about that domain and makes really specific comments on it. So, it is hard to say with journals. Some journals have not yet published any meta-analyses but I think they will. Time will tell.

**As a final question, what advice do you have for second language researchers, especially for those who are interested in quantitative research?**

Well, that is another fine question to think about. My recommendations would be to develop a broad understanding of quantitative methods. I also think that it is important to find your niche. In the quantitative domain I think it can be helpful both to advance in the field and to establish yourself as an expert in something. And in some cases, it might be

useful to take additional statistics classes and to study independently. Further, it might be helpful to work with people from other domains, departments or fields as a way to gain in-depth expertise in a unique analysis or technique. It can also help introduce new ideas into your program, or into the field as a whole.

**References**

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