Entrevista

Paths in Applied Linguistics: A conversation with Nina Spada

Caminhos em Linguística Aplicada: uma conversa com Nina Spada

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Interviewee

Dr. Nina Spada has been a Professor in the Language and Literacies Education program at the University of Toronto (Canada) since 2000. She is a researcher in the area of second language acquisition, focusing on the role of instruction in second/foreign (L2) learning. Previously, she was a professor for 15 years at McGill University in Montreal (Canada).

Dr. Spada has published several books and articles on second language learning and has worked as a visiting professor all over the world. Her research targeted at investigating the contributions of instruction in classroom settings has received international recognition and has paved the way to understandings about L2 teaching methods.

Among plentiful publications, her book *How Languages are Learned* (in co-authorship with Patsy Lightbown by Oxford University Press) won in 1993 the first prize in the Applied Linguistics Section of the Duke of Edinburgh Competition. Ever since, the book has been internationally considered a guide on second language learning and has had four editions (the last one published in 2013).

Interviewers

Dr. Marília dos Santos Lima is a professor in the Applied Linguistics graduate program at the University of Vale do Rio dos Sinos in São Leopoldo (Brazil). She is a researcher in the area of foreign language acquisition, focusing her studies on collaborative tasks as a means of fostering learning. Previously, she worked for numerous years at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul in Porto Alegre (Brazil).

Dr. Lima holds a doctorate in Applied Linguistics from Reading University (England) and has been a visiting professor at the Modern Language Center of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, working alongside Dr. Spada.

Dr. Patrícia da Silva Campelo Costa Barcellos is a professor in the Modern Languages Department of Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul. Her research interests focus on collaborative dialogue and technologies applied to language learning.

Dr. Costa Barcellos completed a doctorate in Computing in Education at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul and in Applied Linguistics at the University of Vale do Rio dos Sinos, under the supervision of Dr. Lima

Marília dos Santos Lima (MSL) and Patrícia da Silva Campelo Costa Barcellos (PCB): Could you first tell us about your current professional activities?

Nina Spada (NS): I am Professor in the Language and Literacies Education program at the University of Toronto where I teach courses in second language acquisition (SLA), research methods and classroom research

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in L2 learning and teaching. My research investigates the effects of form-focused instruction on L2 learning and the extent to which different types of instruction contribute to different types of L2 knowledge. For a list of my publications and other professional and scholarly activity go to: http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/ctl/Faculty_Staff/Faculty_Profiles/1475/Nina_Spada.html

In addition to my teaching and research at the University of Toronto I am the co-editor of two book series. One of them is entitled *Key Concepts for the Language Classroom* published by Oxford University Press. All volumes in the series are directed to primary and secondary second/foreign language teachers with the goal of making research accessible, relevant and meaningful to their pedagogical practice. For more information about this book series go to: https://elt.oup.com/catalogue/items/global/teacher_development/oxford_key_concepts_for_the_language_classroom/?cc=usandselLanguage=enandmode=hub. The second book series that I co-edit is *Language Learning and Language Teaching*. It covers a wide range of topics on theory and research on L2 learning and teaching and is intended for an academic audience (i.e. researchers and graduate students). For more information go to: https://benjamins.com/#catalog/books/lllt/main

MSL and PCB: How do you see the field of second language acquisition in applied linguistics today?

NS: I see the field of second language acquisition today as increasingly diversified, reflective and expansive. Since the mid-90s and in response to what is sometimes referred to as a "social turn" in SLA there has been a shift from quantitative, cognitive, positivist epistemologies dominant in SLA for many years to more qualitative socially-oriented perspectives on L2 learning (e.g. sociocultural, language socialization and identity theories). It has also led to a wider range of methodologies employed in SLA research (e.g. conversational analysis, systemic functional analysis) placing greater emphasis on variation rather than universals, individuals rather than groups, and language use versus language learning leading to important discussion (and debate) regarding relationships between the two. An example of the expansive nature of SLA includes the introduction and consolidation of more usage-based theories including emergentism, connectionism, and accompanying methodologies (e.g. corpus linguistics). Another SLA domain that has expanded considerably over the last few decades is instructed SLA research. When I was a graduate student in the late 70s and early 80s few studies had been carried out with instructed L2 learners and even fewer in classroom settings. Today it is virtually impossible to keep up with the number of studies carried out in instructed SLA with increasing research in classroom settings. Finally, an interesting and I think healthy characteristic of SLA is a growing interest in the examination of the quality of research in the field

(see for example Plonsky and Gass, 2011). This includes a steady increase in the number of research synthesis (e.g. meta-analyses) indicating that sufficient research has been done in several domains of SLA to assess the quality of studies seeking answers to central questions in the field and to provide direction for future research.

MSL and PCB: How do you see the teaching of grammar in second/foreign language acquisition through the last two decades?

NS: In the 1980's we saw a major shift from an exclusive focus on forms within traditional discrete-point structure-based teaching to an emphasis on communicative language teaching (CLT). In some contexts, particularly in North America, this shift was extreme, leading to an exclusive focus on meaning within CLT with no (or very little) attention to grammar and corrective feedback. Within the last two decades, however, a consensus has been reached among second/foreign language teachers and researchers that a combination of attention to form and meaning is best. This is based to a great extent on accumulating evidence that instruction which is primarily focused on meaning and includes attention to form is more effective than instruction which focuses exclusively on meaning or exclusively on form (Spada, 2011; Lightbown and Spada, 2013). Furthermore, several research syntheses that have investigated the effects of instruction on L2 learning over the last 20 years indicate that explicit attention to form is more effective than implicit attention to form (Norris and Ortega, 2000; Spada and Tomita, , 2010). However, some researchers have argued that the reason why explicit grammatical instruction has been found to be more effective is because the studies focused on the development of learners' explicit knowledge (i.e. conscious analyzed knowledge – the kind that is measured on grammar tests). The majority of the studies examined in the research syntheses did not investigate the effects of instruction in relation to learners' implicit knowledge (i.e. intuitive, quickly accessed knowledge – the kind measured on certain types of communicative tasks). Thus the question remains as to whether different types of instruction lead to different types of knowledge. The challenge of developing tests to measure different types of L2 knowledge, particularly implicit knowledge, also remains. These issues are motivating the work of several SLA researchers today, including some of my own research (Spada *et al.*, 2014; Spada *et al.*, 2015).

MSL and PCB: How do you define form-focused instruction (FFI)?

NS: In the late 1990's when I introduced the term *form-focused instruction* (FFI), I defined it as "any pedagogical effort which is used to draw the learners' attention to form either implicitly or explicitly… within meaning-based approaches to L2 instruction [and] in

which a focus on language is provided in either spontaneous or predetermined ways" (Spada, 1997, p. 73). This definition differs from Long's (1991) conceptualization of *focus on form*, which is restricted to spontaneous language use in meaning-based interaction. It also differs from Ellis' (2001) definition of *form-focused instruction*, which is broader in scope and includes instruction that focuses exclusively on forms. I defined FFI as a focus on form within meaning/communicative instructional contexts because my interest is not about how grammar is taught in traditional structure-based approaches to L2 teaching but rather how grammar is taught within approaches to language teaching that are communicative and/or content-based. Several years later, Patsy Lightbown and I distinguished between two types of FFI – isolated and integrated. In keeping with the original definition of FFI, both approaches include attention to form within meaning or content-based instruction; however, they differ in terms of *when* the attention to form is provided. In isolated FFI information about and attention to form is provided separately from communicative practice. In integrated FFI attention to form is embedded within communicative practice (Spada and Lightbown, 2008). In recent years I have carried out research to investigate different aspects of isolated and integrated FFI. This includes studies to explore teacher and learner preferences for the two types of instruction (Valeo and Spada, 2015; Spada and dos Santos Lima, 2015) as well the contributions of isolated and integrated FFI to L2 learning (Spada *et al.*, 2014).

MSL and PCB: What is the contribution of theory and research on FFI to the teaching and learning of second/foreign languages?

NS: The contribution of theory and research on FFI to the teaching and learning of second/foreign languages is that it has provided evidence of the need for and the benefits of a balance between meaning-based and form-based instruction. I think most teachers have known this all along and some skeptics might say that we did not need research to tell us this! Nonetheless, there are still many teachers who believe that an exclusive focus on language forms is the most effective way to teach a second/foreign language and the research findings do not support this. Fortunately, there are fewer teachers who would argue that the best way to teach an L2 is to focus only on communication and ignore grammar. FFI research does not support this position either. Overall, I think FFI research has been relevant and meaningful to teachers because it has addressed fundamental questions about what teachers do in their classrooms and how this contributes to their students' L2 development. Nonetheless, there are still many unanswered questions. One of them already referred to above is what type of L2 knowledge results from instruction. Another equally important question is the extent to which different types of instruction interact with individual learner characteristics (e.g. aptitude, learning style/preferences) to lead to more or less successful learning.

MSL and PCB: If you had to select four main studies on FFI, which would you suggest? Why are they relevant to FFI?

NS: Given that hundreds (if not thousands) of FFI studies have been conducted since the late 90s it is difficult to select 4 main studies to highlight. This is particularly challenging because FFI studies include research on direct instruction as well as corrective feedback. Thus I have decided instead to reference 4 different types of publications (indicated with an asterisk in the references below) that are related to FFI: (i) A single empirically-based study examining the effects of FFI (instruction and corrective feedback) on SLA. This article by Lyster and Mori (2006) is important because it provides convincing evidence and a compelling hypothesis arguing that FFI "activities and interactional feedback that are counterbalanced with a classroom's predominant communicative orientation are likely to prove more effective than instructional activities and interactional feedback that are congruent with its predominant communicative orientation" (p. 269). (ii) A research synthesis of studies investigating the effectiveness of FFI. This seminal study by Norris and Ortega (2000) was the first meta-analysis in instructed SLA and served as a model for subsequent meta-analyses. (iii) This review article by DeKeyser (2012) discusses the complex interplay between learner, instructional and target feature variables and their combined contributions to L2 learning. I believe it is important because it raises several questions yet to be investigated in future FFI studies. (iv) This article discusses the ethics of doing research with instructed learners. While it is not specific to FFI, Ortega (2005) raises several ethical issues that are of direct relevance to instructed SLA research.

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Marília dos Santos Lima, Patrícia da Silva Campelo Costa Barcellos, Nina Spada

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