

Attaining second language proficiency

BAAL (British Association of Applied Linguistics)
Language Learning and Teaching SIG (Special Interest Group)
4th annual conference
1 and 2 July 2008
University of Greenwich

“Second language acquisition (SLA) research is one of many sources that second and foreign language (SL/FL) teachers may draw on in making decisions about their pedagogical practice.” (Lightbown, 2003).

With this principle in mind, Keith Faulkner of the University of Sheffield attended this conference in July 2008.

The three brief keynote speakers’ session summaries below constitute his interpretation of the relevance of issues raised in the course of the conference, in terms of training our beginning teachers of MFL.

The session summaries:

- name the speaker and his or her institution;
- give the title of their talk;
- provide a one-line description of the central theme;
- make a link to questions relevant to MFL teacher training raised explicitly or implicitly;
- provide key linguistic phrases and authors to assist with library or internet searches in the area of study.

Roger Hawkins of the University of Essex gave a plenary talk on *The role of statistical learning and innate knowledge in early L2 grammars*.

In presenting recent studies that have shown that older language learners have the capacity to divide up units of sound into words, the session potentially raised these questions for MFL trainees:

1. To what extent should we be familiarising learners with the sounds of parts of words as well as words to assist their language acquisition?
Key linguistic phrase: word segmentation;
Key author: Saffron
2. To what extent is our language learning ability innate?
Key linguistic phrase: universal grammar;
Key author: Chomsky
3. Is our language learning ability constrained by age?
Key linguistic phrase: critical period hypothesis;
Key author: Lenneberg

Jan Hulstijn of the University of Amsterdam gave a plenary talk asking the question *What IS language proficiency?* He argued that all ‘proficient’ L2 users have an identifiable common ‘linguistic core’ of oral knowledge and processing skill. The knowledge is a combination of vocabulary (lexicon), grammar (form) and speech sounds (phonology); the skill is the ability to process that knowledge at a speed of up to 5 syllables per second. Complementary knowledge and cognitive skills that are unique to L2 users’ particular personal and professional contexts increase proficiency beyond the core level.

This identification of a ‘linguistic core’ and complementary proficiency has implications for testing, which the speaker recommended be in two stages.

The session potentially raised these questions for MFL trainees:

1. Is there a working model of the 'linguistic core'?
Key linguistic phrase: communicative competence;
Key source: Common European Framework
2. How do we teach learners to become familiar with the sounds of the target language as well as vocabulary and grammar?
Key linguistic phrase: acquisition of second language phonology
Key authors: various
3. To what extent does knowledge of L1 form assist in attaining L2 proficiency?
Key linguistic phrase: contrastive analysis hypothesis;
Key author: Lado

Bill Van Patten of the University of Texas presented an update entitled *Explicit instruction in instructed second language acquisition: does instruction make a difference?*

The speaker's review of the history of research of the past 30 years caused him to pose another question "What is instruction supposed to affect?" and consider the latest research on different models of instruction: process (pi) traditional (ti) and meaning-based output (moi).

Van Patten iterated the importance of process instruction (pi): familiarisation with patterns before rules. He argued traditional instruction (ti) customarily moves too quickly from rule explanation to expectations of production, and the relationship between language input and output requires further research before meaning-based output (moi) instruction can be acknowledged as independent of 'pi'.

The session potentially raised these questions for MFL trainees:

1. How do teachers collect evidence that our learners can understand language receptively?
Key linguistic phrases: process instruction
Key author: Van Patten
2. At what stage might we expect them to imitate and reproduce receptively learned patterns?
Key linguistic phrases: meaning-based output instruction
Key author: Benati
3. What does research from the 1970s, 1980s tell us about the value of instructed language learning?
Key linguistic phrases: form and structure, grammar, traditional instruction
Key authors: Krashen, Long, Lightbown, Pavesi, Ellis

Keith FAULKNER, Sheffield, 3 July 2008 for the ITT MFL forum
REVISED and updated 7 May 2009 for the ITT MFL website