ASp
la revue du GERAS

1 | 1993
**Actes du 13e colloque du GERAS et de l'atelier Langue
de spécialité du 32e congrès de la SAES**

Theory in second/foreign language research

Abdel Kazeroni

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/asp/4365>

DOI: 10.4000/asp.4365

ISSN: 2108-6354

Publisher

Groupe d'étude et de recherche en anglais de spécialité

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 March 1993

Number of pages: 129-138

ISSN: 1246-8185

Electronic reference

Abdel Kazeroni, « Theory in second/foreign language research », *ASp* [Online], 1 | 1993, Online since 25 April 2014, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/asp/4365> ; DOI : 10.4000/asp.4365

This text was automatically generated on 19 April 2019.

Tous droits réservés

Theory in second/foreign language research

Abdel Kazeroni

- 1 One of the fundamental claims of any field of study to being scientific is having a theory.¹ A theory which would guide research within the given field of study. In Anglo-American terms, “applied linguistics” and in Quebeco-French terms, “language didactics” as a field of study has as yet to construct a satisfactory theory. Attempts have been made to construct such a theory. However so far only suggestions for a conceptual framework such as Stern’s (1983) or Germain’s (1989) have proved promising. A theory in Second/Foreign Language research would not only be of interest to researchers but also to classroom teachers.
- 2 This paper sets out to underline the points of convergence between six authors on Second/Foreign Language Teaching and Learning: Stern (1983), Hammerly (1985), McLaughlin (1987), van Lier (1988), Spolsky (1989) and Germain (1989). A rapid critique of each will be given. The paper also intends to show (1) the necessity of theory for a given field of study to become “independent”, (2) the necessity of theory in Second/Foreign Language Teaching and Learning from the teacher’s point of view, and (3) how theory in teaching Second/Foreign Languages varies from theory in teaching disciplines such as mathematics or physics.
- 3 Throughout this paper my point of view is that of a practising classroom teacher and the field of study that is central to my profession is teaching and learning second/foreign languages. In order to state my position I think a quote from Stern will not be completely out of place:

Theory is implicit in the practice of language teaching. It reveals itself in the assumptions underlying practice, in planning a course of study, in the routines of the classroom, in the value judgments about language teaching, and in the decisions that the language teacher has to make day by day. A language teacher can express his theoretical conviction through classroom activities as much as (or, indeed, better than) through the opinions he voices in discussions at professional meetings. (1983: 23-24)

- 4 There has been a sudden surge of research manuals in second language research. Though of great value to the researcher, I call them manuals since one is told how to carry out research and very little is said about theory (or theories) that would guide this very research, with the exception of Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) who give more space to theory than others.
- 5 Therefore, in order to find out how second/foreign language teaching and learning theories are constructed the teacher and/or the potential researcher have to turn to, either existing accomplished research, or to books specifically on theory and theory construction (and not necessarily in second/foreign language research).
- 6 The six authors I have turned to agree on the usefulness of theory in second/foreign language research and all agree on the role of a theory and the criteria needed to develop a theory (usefulness, applicability, coherence, consistency, comprehensiveness, explanatory power, verifiability, simplicity, clarity, etc.)
- 7 However, serious differences exist between the authors. For example, whereas Stern (1983), Hammerly (1985) and Germain (1989) concentrate on language teaching/learning, McLaughlin (1987) and Spolsky (1989) concentrate on language learning and van Lier (1988) is more concerned with language learning in a classroom setting.
- I will first deal with language teaching/learning.
- 8 Stern and Germain in turn try to develop conceptual frameworks for language teaching/learning, whereas Hammerly introduces a new “science”, *linguistics* which he defines as “the science of second (“foreign”) language teaching and learning” (Hammerly 1985: 49). This new science, which to begin with sounds interesting since the language teacher has a science of her/his own, turns out to be no more than yet another language teaching methodology, the new CA-OB (cognitive audio-oral bilingual) method. Stern’s teaching/learning model is based on his own “general model for second language teaching”, “framework for examination of second language learning” and Dunkin and Biddle’s “model for the study of classroom teaching” (see fig. 1).

Fig. 1. A teaching-learning model

Source: Stern 1983: 500

- 9 However, he does not succeed in bringing the models together, most probably, because he has a systems approach, whereas Dunkin and Biddle have an analytic and nomothetic approach (see Germain 1989). On the other hand, Germain by using Legendre's educational model (see fig. 2) tries to avoid the "mismatch" of Stern's model. His model comprises social context, learner and learning situation, teacher and teaching situation, and language. Though Germain's model is a powerful tool for analyzing different approaches to language teaching, it is not easy to see how these four components interact with each other, and how possible interactions would affect teaching or learning. To his own admission his model can be somewhat unsatisfactory when classroom practices are to be analyzed.

Figure 2. Le modèle SOMA de la situation pédagogique

I now turn to language learning.

- 10 McLaughlin presents adult second-language learning as a "subfield of applied linguistics" (1987: vii), he then expounds his view of theory and goes on to present five different theories of second language learning: The Monitor Model, Interlanguage Theory, Linguistic Universals, Acculturation/Pidginization Theory, and finally Cognitive Theory. I would like to point out four things. Firstly, McLaughlin calls Second Language Acquisition (SLA), second-language research. This is most probably due to his Krashen bashing tendencies. Secondly, he qualifies SLA domain of study as a "subfield of applied linguistics". However, I would argue that SLA is a field of study in its own right. SLA has developed various tools of research and theories. Applied Linguistics, on the other hand, still seems to be in search of a real identity (See Grabe & Kaplan 1992). Furthermore, unlike SLA, Applied Linguistics does not have a unifying, coherent theory. It seems to be mostly "project based". Thirdly, McLaughlin is more concerned with theories of "limited scope" arguing that a general theory blurs details (1987: 157).

- 11 But language teaching is a complex affair, and it therefore needs general theories, that would take parameters such as social context, teaching, learning, etc. It may be argued that at the present time we do not have into account. General theories would try to account for the connectedness of these different parameters. And finally, in his closing paragraph, McLaughlin states: "At this point, research and theory cannot act as sources of prescriptions about teaching procedures." This implies that one day "prescription" would be possible. However, Ellis (1985) defines SLA as being "descriptive" rather than "prescriptive". Moreover, as Lightbown (1985) points out SLA research, neither tells us what to teach, nor does it tell us how to teach.
- 12 Spolsky, unlike McLaughlin, introduces a general theory of language learning. Spolsky, using Jackendoff's preference model presents a set of 74 typical and categorical conditions. The major advantage of his model is the fact he pays attention to the social context. However, ambiguities are numerous. It is not clear why some conditions are typical and not necessary.
- 13 There is very little empirical evidence to back up most of the conditions. Why stop at 74 conditions? The nature of each condition (description, prediction, etc.) is not really well defined. Very little space is given to formal instruction. In fact only one condition is on the effects of teaching on learning (condition 74). "Within the literature that we have been surveying, there is little demonstrable effect of teaching on learning" (Spolsky 1989: 197). However, it has to be said that without formal instruction we would not have as many learners in formal institutions learning languages that they would have never learnt, otherwise.
- 14 Van Lier provides a refreshing look at language research since he concentrates on the classroom. He therefore takes the social context of the classroom into account. But, he fails to find relationships between the social context of the classroom and the components of the Germain's model.
- 15 In the opening sentence of this paper I stated that my field of study is teaching and learning second/foreign languages. A selective survey of the field has shown that different scholars approach "language education" from different perspectives. Stern and Germain have general theories of teaching and learning in mind. Hammerly turns his theory into yet another methodology. McLaughlin is more concerned with hypotheses and micro theories of learning. Van Lier has a very narrow focus.
- 16 And Spolsky has a speculative general theory of learning in mind. Until and unless models such Stern's or Germain's have not been developed further teaching and learning second/foreign languages² will have to borrow half-baked theories from Applied Linguistics or hope that SLA research can guide it in activities such as syllabus design. However, one cannot rely on Applied Linguistics, theoretically and ethically speaking. There are far too many disparate applied linguistic theories that fail to form a complete whole.
- 17 Moreover, Language Didactics is accountable to a whole range of supervising bodies, whereas Applied Linguistics only seems to be accountable to bodies that finance its research projects. SLA can be of great help and interest to Language Didactics only as far as language acquisition processes are concerned. Given Language Didactics encompasses so many different parameters, it has to draw upon knowledge acquired in other fields of study. But this has to be done using guiding principles, and guiding principles exist only when a general theory of Language Didactics exists.

- 18 A general theory of Language Didactics is of prime importance in language teacher education, if we are to avoid the pitfalls of prescription and “methodology”, if the teacher is required to know why he does, what he does, in a given situation. Language teaching and consequently, learners can only benefit from a sound Language Didactics theory that no longer takes second place to theories of psychology, linguistics, applied linguistics, etc. Furthermore, the language teacher will then be in better position to understand the relevance of theories of neighboring fields of study.
- 19 However, theory in language teaching is inherently different from theory in disciplines such as mathematics or physics. In mathematics there is a theory of teaching and a theory to teach. In language teaching there is Language Didactics and a language to teach. Of course, some people teach theory of language, but that no longer is teaching a language. This may explain the move towards learner training, since in learner training, language learning theories are explained to, and shared with the learners.
-

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ellis, R. 1985. *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Germain C. 1989. “Un cadre conceptuel pour la didactique des langues”. *Études de Linguistique Appliquée* 75.
- Grabe, W and R.B. Kaplan (eds.). 1992. *Introduction to Applied Linguistics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Hammerly, H. 1985. *An Integrated Theory of Language Teaching and its Practical Consequences*. Blaine, WA: Second Language Publications.
- Lightbown, P.M. 1985. “Great expectations: Second-language acquisition research and classroom teaching”. *Applied Linguistics* 6/2, 173-189.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. and M.H. Long. 1991. *An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research*. London: Longman.
- McLaughlin, B. 1987. *Theories of Second-Language Learning*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Stern, H.H. 1983. *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Spolsky, B. 1989. *Conditions for Second Language Learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- van Lier, L. 1988. *The Classroom and the Language Learner: Ethnography and second-language classroom research*. Harlow, England: Longman.

NOTES

1. An updated and revised version of this paper was presented at the Second International EUROSLA Conference, Jyväskylä University, Finland, 4-7 June 1992. The paper explores in more detail the relationship between Language Didactics and neighboring fields of study. More space is

also given to language research and language teacher education. A copy of the revised version can be obtained from the author on request.

2. It would be more economical to use the Quebeco-French expression “Language Didactics” to mean teaching and learning second/foreign languages, bearing in mind parameters such as social context, learner and learning situation, teacher and teaching situation, and language.

AUTHOR

ABDEL KAZERONI

Didactique des langues et interculturalité, Technologie et Sciences de l'Homme, Université de Technologie de Compiègne