

INTRODUCTION: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN SLA

Mailce Borges Mota

Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

The publication of this issue of *Ilha do Desterro* coincides with the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the Graduate Program in English at the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC), where, throughout the history of the Program, second/foreign language acquisition/learning (SLA) has been an active field of research: in the general context of the line of research “Learning and Teaching”, once called “Second Language Acquisition”, the theses and dissertations presented in the area have dealt with the main issues discussed in the national and international scenarios and have done so from a variety of conceptual approaches and research methods. It is, thus, possible to find, among the many studies carried out in the past four decades, research on a variety of themes, including contrastive analysis, error analysis, interaction, grammar acquisition, effects of instruction, interlanguage phonology, speech production, and classroom processes.

Ilha do Desterro	Florianópolis	nº 60	p. 009- 014	jan/jun 2011
------------------	---------------	-------	-------------	--------------

The area has had less visibility, though, in terms of publications in *Ilha do Desterro* – the Journal of the Graduate Program in English at UFSC. *Ilha do Desterro* was first published in 1979 and is the longest-running journal on language, literature, and cultural studies in English in Brazil, but this is, in fact, the third issue we can say is entirely dedicated to SLA. Given that SLA is a well-established area of research in the international context and is steadily growing as a field of enquiry in Brazil, the objective of this special issue is to give a broad overview of what we consider to be important themes in the contemporary study of the mechanisms and processes involved in the acquisition of a non-primary language. The 11 papers of this collection address issues related to the cognition and neurocognition of SLA, language transfer, metalinguistic awareness, oral proficiency, social networking, software evaluation, and computer assisted language learning.

The first three papers focus on working memory. In their article, Wen and Skehan offer a comprehensive review of the literature on foreign language (L2) aptitude and on working memory to build a case for incorporating this construct as a component of aptitude. Their claim is based on three inferences drawn from the research on working memory and SLA: individual differences in working memory capacity are related to performance in a second language; there are reliable and valid methods to assess working memory capacity; working memory plays a central role in second language development. The authors conclude that, from both a theoretical and empirical perspective, the proposal is promising enough to motivate the reopening of the agenda of foreign language aptitude.

Chan, Skehan, and Gong discuss the development of tests which make use of language-specific non-word repetition as a measure of working memory – more specifically, of the phonological buffer in

the tripartite model proposed by Baddeley and Hitch (1974) since, in their view, this is the component that is more immediately relevant to the understanding of phonemic coding ability, one of the components of L2 aptitude. The authors report, then, on the challenges they faced in developing a non-word repetition test in Cantonese, in which characters represent syllables and not individual sounds, to show that the method of test construction they propose is workable. They claim that non-word repetition tests constructed on the basis of the characteristics of the L2 allows for the assessment of both the difficulty of the test and the difficulty of the language.

Weissheimer reports on a study on the relationship between individual differences in working memory capacity and L2 speech development in the course of 12 weeks. Assessing working memory capacity by means of an adaptation of the speaking span test, proposed by Daneman (1991), and dividing the participants into lower-span subjects and high-span subjects, Weissheimer shows that both low- and high-span subjects improved their speech production between test phases, but only low-span subjects showed statistically significant improvements in working memory capacity. The author explains the results in terms of strategies to encode and retrieve information from working memory.

The next two studies, by Buchweitz and Babcock, Krawczyk and Scialabba, focus on the neural correlates of language processing. Buchweitz, emphasizing the combination of machine learning analysis techniques and brain imaging data, discusses the results of selected empirical studies on the organization of conceptual knowledge and reports on the preliminary findings of a brain imaging study on cross-language thought identification to propose the existence of a common semantic neural representation across people and across languages. Babcock, Krawczyk and Scialabba, based on

the premises of the Declarative/Procedural Model in its extension to the L2 (e.g., Ullman, 2001; 2005), investigate the hypothesis that it is the onset of use of procedural memory in the L2 which is the threshold of cognitive benefits for bilinguals. The researchers assessed participants' verbal and nonverbal memory and recorded ERP measures during the processing of an artificial language. The results did not support the hypothesis and are explained in terms of methodological drawbacks in the assessment of declarative and procedural memory.

Based on the claim that theories of argument realization are a useful theoretical approach to the study of interlanguage development, Souza investigates language transfer effects in Brazilian L2 learners' representation of transitivity alternations in verbs of manner of movement. Participants of the study were divided into two experimental groups, according to their proficiency in English as an L2 – lower lexical proficiency and higher lexical proficiency – and two control groups. All participants were required to perform an acceptability judgement test consisting of sentences with verbs instantiating caused-motion alternation. The results show that, for four of the five verbs, there were significant differences between the judgement of L2 learners and that of native speakers of English. These results are interpreted as evidence that caused-motion alternation is a type of argument realization that is not present in the grammar of Portuguese and that has to be learned as a new syntactic construction.

Xhafaj and Mota set out to investigate whether metalinguistic awareness in L1 and L2 is related to L2 proficiency. Participants were given a battery of tests assessing L1 literacy, L2 proficiency, and L1 and L2 phonological, morphological, and syntactic awareness. A relationship was found between L1 literacy and L2 proficiency, but that between metalinguistic awareness and proficiency was shown

to be complex. The authors propose that an adjustment of the instruments used to assess literacy and metalinguistic awareness is necessary in order to test the adult population reliably.

The assessment of L2 oral proficiency, a thorny issue in the area of assessment of proficiency, is discussed by Borges-Almeida and Consolo. More specifically, the authors tackle the role of pronunciation and investigate two aspects of this component of speaking in the Test of Oral Proficiency in English (TEPOLI): deviations in vowel segments and deviations in syllable structure. Their main conclusion is that, since the TEPOLI is aimed at testing the oral proficiency of English teachers, the assessment of pronunciation should be part of a more global judgment of language skills.

In “The use of social networking sites for language practice and learning”, Baralt reports on a study in which Orkut is used for a course in Portuguese as a foreign language. Arguing that this social networking site can be used as a tool for students to perform tasks, notice forms, receive input and produce output, the researcher states that the study aimed at providing learners with an authentic environment for interaction, exposing learners to Brazilian e-discourse, and examining learners’ interaction on a networking site in a foreign language. The results show that social networking sites can be a good medium for language learning and practice.

The two last papers of the present issue deal with Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). Borges reports on the development and validation of an ESL/EFL software evaluation instrument based on the principles of the communicative approach and of the interactive approach to computer use in language learning. The results of tests of internal consistency, inter-item reliability, and inter-rater reliability showed that the instrument can be used as a reliable tool to assess the extent to which a given ESL/EFL software

contributes to the development of language skills. On a somewhat related issue, Amaral, focusing on the notion that CALL has a multidisciplinary nature, discusses the recent literature in the area and proposes that CALL projects need an inclusive approach to design and implementation. The researcher illustrates his claims by reporting on the development of an Intelligent CALL system.

We believe the eleven papers included in this collection are good examples of recent trends in the field of SLA. From cognition and neurocognition to linguistic aspects, skill assessment and pedagogy, the papers reflect the variety of topics one needs to address in order to better understand the development of an L2. Every selection involves a certain degree of subjectivity and, as expected, the one we present here is affected by our experiences in the academic community. Many more equally relevant topics could have been explored and we hope other researchers get inspired to give their contributions and help consolidate SLA in Brazil.

This issue of *Ilha do Desterro* is dedicated to Dr. Barbara Oughton Baptista, for her friendship and loyalty.

References

- Baddeley, A. D., & Hitch, G. (1974). Working memory. In G.A. Bower (Ed.), *The psychology of learning and motivation*, Vol. 8. New York: Academic Press.
- Daneman, M. (1991). Working memory as a predictor of verbal fluency. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, 20, 445-464.
- Ullman, M. T. (2001a). The neural basis of lexicon and grammar in first and second language: the declarative/procedural model. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 4(1), 105-122.
- Ullman, M. T. (2005). A cognitive neuroscience perspective on second language acquisition: The declarative/procedural model. In C. Sanz (Ed.), *Mind and Context in Adult Second Language Acquisition: Methods, Theory and Practice* (pp. 141-178). Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.