# INTRODUCTION: CURRENT ISSUES IN THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF SECOND/FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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This issue of *Ilha do Desterro* is meant to bring together some current trends in the field of Second/Foreign Language Teaching and Learning. The nine articles can be said to belong to three of the main domains in applied linguistics today: sociocultural approaches, focus-on-form concerns and computer-assisted language learning. These articles clearly illustrate the growing tendency of applied linguistics to draw from other fields such as sociology, anthropology, education and computer-oriented studies. Eleven scholars from different countries have contributed to this issue.

The articles in the first group deal with **sociocultural perspectives** on the teaching and learning of foreign languages and include a review of current sociocultural studies (Hall), a sociocultural study of classroom interaction (Consolo), an analysis of sociocultural factors affecting actual learning (Miccoli), and an analysis of procedures used by university student teachers to understand classroom practice from a sociocultural perspective (Heberle).

Hall begins her article with the claim that interaction has been considered to have a fundamental role in Second/Foreign language development. After reporting on the different paths that traditional

perspectives on interaction have taken, she describes the main tenets of the sociocultural perspective on interaction and language learning. Her main aim in contrasting the two perspectives is to point out the different views on language learning they hold: while from the traditional perspective language learning is considered an individual cognitive process, from the sociocultural perspective language learning is seen as a social cognitive process. Hall then reviews several sociocultural studies that depict teacher-learner interaction, which reveal that students' learning is highly dependent on "the kinds of communicative environments teachers create in their classrooms through their interaction, and the means of assistance that they provide to students take part in these environments" (p.11). Finally, she draws some pedagogical implications from the studies reviewed, and stresses the importance of teachers' contributions, such as challenging and/or intellectually weighty questions to foster language development.

From the same sociocultural perspective, Consolo reports on an investigation of several classrooms and teachers in undergraduate courses of foreign language in a Brazilian university, in an attempt to document the relationship between the participation of students in specific classrooms and the development of their target language communicative skills. He provides an analysis of interaction data from two classroom environments, one of which creates a more symmetrical dialogic relationship by means of scaffolding. In contrast, he provides data from another classroom lacking any facilitative discourse features such as the ones present in the former environment, and where the kind of interaction generated is completely asymmetrical and teacher-controlled, allowing only minimal learner participation, and thus unlikely to foster learners' development.

Also along sociocultural lines, but with a different focus, Miccoli analyses not classroom interaction but what she calls the classroom experiences of two university students of foreign languages. The main premise of this study is that, following Vygotsky (1978,1986), the sociocultural setting is the fundamental factor for fostering cognitive development. The data obtained from the use of the technique of

stimulated recall with two university students leads Miccoli to identify two kinds of experience: collective and individual experiences. The author concludes that individual experiences influence collective experiences, and highlights the importance that motives or goals had in the classroom experiences of the participants investigated.

Finally, Heberle reports on a teaching experience she had at a Brazilian university and proposes a series of tasks that can help student teachers become more aware of sociocultural factors of language and education. Based on systemic functional grammar and critical discourse analysis, she suggests that student teachers can develop sociocultural awareness by means of different types of classroom observation. By discussing some written data collected during an ethnographic-oriented study, Heberle shows how student teachers can be enabled to see language and its teaching as a complex social phenomenon, not as a mere list of structures.

The second group of articles addresses contemporary research concerns about **focus on form** and their relation to second language learning/teaching. The articles deal with a variety of topics: a discussion about tasks which favor *focus on form*[1] (Storch), a discussion of teachers' practices and rationales about grammar teaching (Borg) and an analysis of spoken English data, including suggestions on how to practically incorporate this knowledge into language classrooms (Wong & Celce-Murcia).

Storch's article discusses the commonly used tasks in *focus on form* research and suggests alternative ones. The study, conducted in a regular ESL classroom, shows that editing, text reconstruction and joint composition tasks led students to pay attention to linguistic structures, and above all, that these tasks involved learners in extensive negotiations. The author also emphasizes the emergence of positive collaborative relationships in some dyads, which contributed to solutions that would not otherwise have been reached.

The article by Borg reports on a qualitative study of second language classrooms, focusing on teacher cognition concerning grammar teaching. The author compares teachers' practices and their

rationales in teaching grammar, based on classroom observations and interviews. His conclusions are: a) all teachers conducted formal instruction; b) teachers focused on form because of their belief that it helps L2 acquisition and because of the positive psychological impact on students and teachers; c) formal instruction was a multi-faceted decision-making process; d) formal instruction is based on teacher cognition and contextual factors and it does not reflect the application of a best method; e) each teacher's practice was unique.

Wong and Celce-Murcia's paper reports on a qualitative discourse analysis of tokens of *(the) same* in naturally occurring spoken American English and its implications for the teaching of English as a second and foreign language. They propose that the grammatical function of *(the) same* is adjectival. Also, their analysis of ESL/EFL textbooks shows that they do not provide the necessary information for learners to understand the appropriate usage of *(the) same*. They suggest that applied linguists and ESL/EFL teachers look for ways of integrating grammar instruction into communicative language teaching, such as calling learners' attention to form in naturally occurring data, which may help them to understand and acquire language.

The third group of articles is concentrated in the area of **new technologies** in teaching and learning practices. While Levy's paper is an overview of CALL research, Paiva's discusses the role of e-mail in the acquisition of English.

Levy's article, based on a corpus of forty-seven 1999 CALL research articles, is an attempt to give the reader an objective description of the CALL area. Levy found that among the most common identifiers co-occurring with *research* are, for instance, *design, evaluation, CMC (Computer-Mediated Communication), artifact, survey* and *learning gains*. This corpora-based research enabled the author to detect two main thematic CALL research areas: CMC-based and artifact-oriented. Levy concludes the article by suggesting that CALL research is crucial for the understanding of the nature and role of technology in language learning, since it may help both applied linguists and teachers to

promote the integration of CALL activities with other types of teaching/learning activities.

The paper by Paiva presents suggestions for integrating e-mail activities into the classroom. It emphasises that teachers should make the students aware of how to better use this instrument. Thus, the article provides some guidelines and netiquette about the use of e-mails. A review of international e-mail projects supports the argument that electronic interaction is an efficient tool for promoting language acquisition in a foreign language context.

This issue also includes a book review by Melo of a book edited by Breen, containig eigth chapters, each by different author and each providing a different view the role that learners play in the learning process in eight chapters by different authors.

All in all, we hope to have provided a contribution to the field of applied Linguistics, specifically to the teaching and learning of second/foreign languages. Also we would like to thank again all the contributors and the other persons who, directly or indirectly, have made possible the publication of this issue of *Ilha do Desterro*, among them, Marcia R. Pawlas Carazzai, Heather Blakemore and Barbara O. Baptista, who helped us with the editing.

## Note

1 The author uses this term as it was coined by Long (1991).

## References

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