Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge Drs. Alister Cumming, Eunice Jang, Julie Kerekes, Sharon Lapkin, Nina Spada, and Merrill Swain for providing us with information about their research activities. An extra special thanks to Dr. Nina Spada for her generous guidance throughout this project.

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Lang. Teach. (2009), **42:4**, 530–535 © Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S0261444809990085

Research in second language studies at Michigan State University

Background

The Second Language Studies (SLS) Program was established in 2005 with the express purpose of providing 'a firm foundation in the field of Second Language Acquisition and its application to current second language research and teaching' (http://sls.msu.edu). Under the leadership of Professor Susan Gass, the program has grown to include 12 core

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444809990085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

faculty members and 27 Ph.D. students. As an interdisciplinary program, linkages across the university exist with the Department of Linguistics and Germanic, Slavic, Asian, and African Languages; the Department of French, Classics, and Italian; the Department of Spanish and Portuguese; the Arabic Language Instruction Flagship; the M.A. TESOL Program; the Center for Language Education and Research; the English Language Center; the Center for the Support of Language Teaching; the Department of Psychology; and the College of Education.

Research themes

The research done by our SLS faculty and graduate students encompasses a wide range of interests and expertise. From Professor Gass' research on the role of interaction in language acquisition and Professor Charlene Polio's examination of second language (L2) writing to Professor Xiaoshi Li's sociolinguistic investigation of the acquisition of L2 Chinese (X. Li in press) and Professor Debra Friedman's work in the areas of language socialization and language revitalization, our research covers both traditional and less-studied aspects of second language acquisition (SLA). Among our current graduate students, Ching-Ni Hsieh and Nobuhiro Kamiya are each examining issues related to language assessment, Emma Trentman and Sara Hillman are investigating the linguistic competence of Arabic heritage speakers, Tomoko Okuno is providing additional insights into the ongoing debate about the efficacy of error feedback, Hiep Chau and Chien-Hsiung Chiu are seeking new ways to enhance ESL writing instruction, and Luke Plonsky is exploring the teaching of adverbials and aspect in Spanish. Among the broad spectrum of research topics, we have identified three main themes to describe in further detail: (a) language processing and learning, (b) feedback and grammar instruction, and (c) computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and technology-enhanced instruction.

Language processing and learning

Our research on language processing and learning seeks to gain a clearer picture of the myriad factors that contribute to both moment-to-moment language comprehension and the gradual accumulation of linguistic knowledge into an integrated system. It includes diverse work on learners' identification and comprehension of L2 words in both oral and written modalities, the role of syntactic priming in L2 production, factors that contribute to L2 linguistic competence, and the development of grammatical sensitivity and lexical systems.

In the area of speech perception, Professor Debra Hardison has undertaken a series of studies concerning auditory-visual integration in segmental perception and word identification. She has expanded the scope of speech research by using computer-based multimodal tools that allow her to analyze several facets of a person's speech event, such as hand gestures, eyebrow raises, head nods, and lip movements. She is currently working on projects investigating the roles of sentence context and visual cues from a person's face and the effects of familiarity with the voice and areas of the face in spoken word identification by L2

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444809990085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

learners. Hardison has also begun a broad investigation into the relationships among learner affect and language use factors, acoustic measures, and rater assessment of the components of L2 speech involving different tasks. Further work in this research area is being carried out by Maren Schierloh, who is exploring the contributions of clear speech and talker familiarity to listening comprehension (Schierloh & Hayes-Harb 2008).

On a different level of processing, Professor Diana Pulido's work explores the contributions of individual differences to L2 reading and vocabulary development at varying degrees of L2 proficiency. Looking at learners' involvement load during an L2 reading task, she has found differential effects for L2 reading proficiency and background knowledge on several stages of lexical input processing (Pulido 2009). Using sophisticated statistical techniques such as structural equation modeling, Pulido is also working to understand how prior language experience affects vocabulary development, which in turn contributes to reading comprehension and further lexical growth (Pulido & Hambrick 2008). Marthe Russell seeks to expand this line of enquiry to the processing of idioms and explore the reader-based factors that may explain how and when learners process L2 figurative language. More broadly, Fei Fei is investigating the role of working memory and language proficiency in the processing of formulaic sequences (FS). Recently, she has examined existing measures of FS and has investigated learner variation using different measures.

Concerning language production, Jennifer Behney has investigated processing loads during the marking of gender agreement and how this relates to the distance between a marked adjective and its governing noun. She also seeks to expand our understanding of syntactic priming phenomena for relative clauses in L2, as does Mark Shea in his investigations of the priming of future verb forms and the role of priming in general in SLA research.

Several graduate students and faculty are investigating the acquisition of grammatical features, specifically gender and number. Employing psycholinguistic methods, Professor Rebecca Foote is studying the use of noun phrase gender cues in spoken word recognition, the processing and production of gender agreement, and learners' sensitivity to person, gender, and number agreement errors. Furthermore, she seeks to challenge current assumptions about age of acquisition effects by looking at L2 grammatical competence among early and late bilinguals (Montrul, Foote & Perpiñán 2008). Professor Patti Spinner is investigating how learners use phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic information to acquire different types of gender and number systems. Her first work examined gender and number in German (Spinner & Juffs 2008) and now she is breaking new ground with her research on the same topic in Swahili, a language with about 16 gender classes (Spinner & Thomas 2008). Jamie Thomas is further examining how L2 Swahili learners process morphemes in inflected and derived words.

Feedback and grammar instruction

Professor Gass' work within the interactionist paradigm, which argues interaction is optimal for L2 learning (Gass 1997, 2002, 2003), has inspired members of the SLS group to research feedback and grammar instruction. Her work has also inspired an edited volume of interactionist studies (Mackey & Polio 2009).

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Professor Shawn Loewen has undertaken a series of studies on different characteristics of feedback, including type, amount, and languages (L1, L2, or both) used. Loewen (2009) focuses on corrective feedback that occurs over multiple turns. Findings suggest that the most common combination of feedback is an elicitation followed by a recast. Loewen is currently working on how English is used in focus-on-form episodes in Chinese and Spanish L2 classes.

The group has pursued other facets of feedback. Exploring interaction-driven learning of Korean object relative clauses, Seongmee Ahn has focused on learners' grammatical sensitivity and their noticing of recasts. Shaofeng Li (in press) has conducted a meta-analysis of empirical studies on corrective feedback (CF). Findings suggest that CF influences learning and that its effects are constrained by the characteristics of different feedback types and by various learner and contextual factors.

In the SLS program at Michigan State University, we have explored the topic of grammar instruction from different perspectives. In a survey of over 700 language students at an American university, Loewen et al. (2009) found systematic differences in beliefs about grammar instruction. The most striking differences appeared between those studying English as a Second Language (ESL) and those studying a foreign language. Through another survey, some of our graduate students are investigating teachers' beliefs about grammar instruction. Focusing on three university Spanish literature classes, Professor Polio and Professor Eve Zyzik have used a multiple case study approach to examine participants' attention to linguistic form and have suggested means to increase classroom opportunities for learners' attention to form (Zyzik & Polio 2008; Polio & Zyzik in press). Drawing upon traditional semantics, cognitive linguistics, and sociocultural theory, Ben White is completing a dissertation that addresses the troublesome area of English article instruction. Through his proposal of a systematic conceptual framework, he seeks to provide a unified account of disparate article uses, rules, and exceptions.

CALL and technology-based instruction

Professors Senta Goertler and Paula Winke have investigated various aspects of CALL, including the effectiveness of technology-enhanced foreign language teaching and student readiness for hybrid language instruction. In particular, they have utilized survey-based methods to explore students' computer access, computer literacy, and attitudes toward hybrid instruction at American universities (Winke & Goertler 2008; Goertler in press). A recurring finding is that while students have general computer access and literacy, they often lack adequate access to, and literacy in, specialized tools necessary for CALL. Goertler & Winke (2008), an edited monograph for the CALICO book series, brings together various perspectives on distance language learning and strives to inform administrators and teachers of necessary considerations for the successful implementation of online or hybrid language learning programs.

A second topic of technology-focused research is the influence of video captioning on vocabulary learning within L2 classrooms. Working within beginner-level Russian classes, Tanya Sydorenko has examined the effect of input modality (video, audio, and captions) on the learning of written and aural word forms, overall vocabulary gains, attention to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444809990085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

input, and vocabulary learning strategies. In a larger project that uses multiple measures for vocabulary learning, Winke, Gass & Sydorenko (2008) have investigated the use of captions within Arabic, Chinese, Russian, and Spanish L2 classrooms. The particular focus was on the effects of captioning order when videos are shown twice.

An additional area of research involves projects funded by the Center for Language Education and Research (CLEAR), a US Department of Education Title VI Language Resource Center. Seongmee Ahn has been working on the development and validation of a web-based multimedia Korean oral proficiency test. Fei Fei has done the same for a free online Chinese pragmatics test (http://clear.msu.edu/clear/pragmatics/register.php). Maren Schierloh, Angelika Kraemer, and Tanya Sydorenko have been evaluating the level-appropriateness of tasks within MIMEA (Multimedia Interactive Modules for Education and Assessment), a free online resource for the development and assessment of socio-pragmatic competence in a variety of foreign languages (http://mimea.clear.msu.edu/).

Activities

From their very first year in the program, graduate students are given the skills and tools necessary to develop their own research topics. Additionally, program faculty provide close collaboration on new and innovative research topics through class projects. As part of our professional development, several students each year are also given the opportunity to teach undergraduate courses on language acquisition and teaching.

Through a diverse research agenda, our program will continue to contribute to the field of SLA. As part of our commitment to research, the SLS program has undertaken activities to promote the sharing and discussion of research findings. Cooperation between faculty and students has led to an annual SLS Symposium, which features student work and invited distinguished speakers. In the 2009 symposium, Judith Kroll, from the Pennsylvania State University, spoke about cognitive perspectives regarding bilingualism and John Norris, from the University of Hawaii, discussed the roles of assessment and evaluation in the improvement of language education research (http://sls.msu.edu/documents/sympProgram.pdf). In autumn 2009, our students are hosting the Second Language Research Forum, with the theme of 'Diverse contributions to SLA: Integrating the parts of a greater whole' (http://sls.msu.edu/slrf09/). Plenary speakers include Professors Bonnie Schwartz (University of Hawaii), Robert Dekeyser (University of Maryland), James Lantolf (the Pennsylvania State University), and Susan Gass. In a further effort to communicate research findings, our students have established the MSU Working Papers in SLS, an online peer-reviewed journal (http://sls.msu.edu/soslap/journal/index.php/sls/index).

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444809990085 Published online by Cambridge University Press