BAAL/CUP seminars 2005

As part of their commitment to research in applied linguistics, The British Association of Applied Linguistics (BAAL) and Cambridge University Press annually support a number of seminars on applied linguistics and second language acquisition. Starting this volume, Language Teaching will be publishing specially-commissioned reports on the seminars.

Instructed second language learning: State of the art

University of York, 11–12 April 2005

The seminar had two main aims: to review recent theoretical and methodological development in instructed SLA and to explore the Language Learning and Teaching (LLT) SIG's emerging research agendas. This short report brings together the main themes addressed by the three keynote presentations and the ten papers.

Alison Mackey (Georgetown University, USA) provided an extensive and authoritative review of research relating to the interaction hypothesis (Mackey & Gass 2006, in press and forthcoming). This included an overview of the evolution of the research, and outlined specific questions to be taken into account in future, such as the roles of 'working memory', 'attention' and 'awareness' in interaction, language processing and language acquisition (and how to define these). Links were made to pedagogy e.g. how task types and error correction types may affect the quality of L2 interaction. Martin Bygate (University of Lancaster, UK) gave an authoritative overview of task-based research to date, and presented a sobering account about the extent to which this research could inform language teaching; for example, how teachers actually use tasks (how do they integrate, implement and assess them?), how they impact on longer term learning (rather than immediate performance), and what students think of tasks. This paper has led to an emerging collaboration amongst some of the participants to investigate task-based instruction in UK secondary schools.

Ros Mitchell (University of Southampton, UK) reviewed the arguments that SLA research and pedagogical research each have their own separate identities and discussed whether and how researchers and practitioners have tried to link the two. She promoted discussion about what might be central to the LLT SIG's agenda (e.g. understanding the SLA process and how instruction can help it) and what might be peripheral (e.g. theorising about the social life of classrooms). Mitchell concluded that 'processing' accounts (including research in the domains of focus on form, processing instruction, input enhancement and interaction) currently offer most potential for promoting systematic research links between development of SLA theory and learners' experience in real classrooms.

Several individual papers further illustrated these issues. Reflecting the kind of link between SLA theory and pedagogical concerns which Mitchell was proposing, Roehr (2006) used emergentist and usage-based models of language learning to explain stimulated recall data which suggested a role for metalinguistic knowledge in SLA, of obvious interest for language instructors. Benati & Lee (in press) provided a coherent overview of Processing Instruction research to date, an example of a sustained research agenda which links accessible and testable theoretical claims with implications for classroom activities. Skoufaki (in press) presented classroom implications of a cognitive linguistic model of language learning. Relevant to Bygate's call for a pedagogic research agenda, almost every participant made reference to methodological challenges at the interface of SLA and teaching, frequently citing Norris & Ortega's (2000) synthesis and meta-analysis of grammar instruction experiments. Marsden (2006 and in press) illustrated how, when trying to both test a learning theory and inform teaching practice via a classroom experiment, the context constrains the type of theory under investigation, its classroom operationalisation, and the nature of the pedagogically-relevant claims which can be made. Ashwell (2006) addressed problems of assessing learning in studies which evaluate different types of grammar instruction.

Seminar participants agreed that the SIG will promote an overall agenda of interdisciplinary inquiry into the field of 'language learning and teaching', including:

- research into language classroom interaction, language learning and teaching and relationships between these, in a range of learning sites (e.g. conventional classrooms, immersion, CLIL, language learning VLEs);
- research strategies and new methodologies for researching language learning and teaching;
- theories of (instructed) second language acquisition;
- teaching and learning of first, second and third languages and relationships between these;
- language education policies and implementation e.g. in task/curriculum design; and
- motivation, language learning strategies and language awareness.

LLT SIG events will be promoted via the BAAL webpage (BAAL <http://www.baal.org.uk>), and other groups working at the interface of LLT research and practice.

Please contact Ros Mitchell (r.f.mitchell@soton.ac.uk) or Emma Marsden (em502@york.ac.uk) if you wish to be added to the LLT SIG email list.

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Language learning/teaching as social (inter)action

University of Newcastle, 13–14 July 2005

The principal objectives of this seminar were: to facilitate paradigm change by investigating language learning/teaching from a social constructional perspective; to explore the implications of such a paradigm shift for the practice of language teaching and learning including teacher education; and to explore the interdisciplinary links of the social constructionist approaches to language learning/teaching and other approaches (e.g. interactional approach, socio-cultural approach)

The fundamental belief of the Social Interactional perspective promoted through this seminar is that language learning and teaching is an essentially social act – the roles and relationships of the learner and the teacher are socially constructed; their identities are formed and transformed in the process of learning and teaching; the linguistic knowledge that is being acquired/taught is also a social knowledge and it is affected by the roles, relationships, attitudes, ideologies of the learner and the teacher. Furthermore, the process of language learning and teaching is regarded as social interaction that is linked to other kinds of social interaction in institutional and non-institutional contexts. The Social Interactional perspective contrasts with other long-standing and dominant research paradigms that regard language learning and teaching as essentially an individual(istic) activity where the learner is either seen as passively receiving large sets of examples and performing some sort of induction to arrive at abstract concepts and skills, or as a genetically pre-programmed organism where the role of the environment is restricted to setting some parameters.

The Social Interactional perspective is also different from the existing sociolinguistic or sociocultural perspectives. In these latter perspectives, language learning and teaching is seen to be linked with, and affected by, the societal structures, cultural values, individual's motivations, identities, policies and ideologies and teacher-learner relationships. In other words, language learning and teaching is regarded as a social product rather than a social process. In contrast, the basic argument put forward by contributors here is that language learning and teaching is a process of social reproduction. It is not simply affected by factors such as ideology, identity, or attitude, but forms and transforms ideologies, identities and attitudes through its very process.

David Block, in his keynote speech, called for the socialisation of SLA, which echoed Ben Rampton's earlier call for a 'returned' applied linguistics. Rampton's argument was that applied linguists needed a more eclectic approach to inquiry if they intended to explore real world problems involving language in the late modern age. This meant, above all, engagement with current work in well-established social science disciplines such as social theory, sociology, politics, anthropology and history. Block extended the argument by suggesting that the analytic framework applied linguists use should be socially, politically and historically rooted and include globalization, multi-level models of migration and transmigration and multi-perspective post-structuralist approaches to identity.

Block and several others also pointed out that language learning is a process of social identification: Learners are not only acquiring a new set of linguistic skills, but also developing a new identity. Language learners present themselves in a variety of ways for a variety of social purposes, which need be understood with reference to the power relations, ideologies and cultural contexts. Zhu Hua presented a detailed analysis of application letters in EFL and demonstrated that despite the specific genre requirements, EFL learners were able to present themselves in different ways with a common goal of obtaining a place on a university course. These different ways of self-presentations were socio-culturally situated and indicated the learners' cultural expectations.

A number of papers addressed issues of the multilingual practices of bilingual children. Peter Martin presented an in-depth study of a Gujarati lesson in a

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complementary school (similar to heritage language schools in the US) in the city of Leicester in the English Midlands. While the lesson was intended to teach Gujarati to the British-born children, the use of English and other languages was not seen to be problematic. In fact, strategic use of multiple languages was very much a feature of complementary schools in Britain, and the minority ethnic children in these schools were able to create a 'safe space' for themselves through it. Similarly, Li Wei examined the tensions between the ideologies of complementary schools, the teachers', parents' and pupils' beliefs about code-switching and their actual use of English and Chinese in Chinese complementary schools in Britain. Nikhat Shameem studied the tensions between education policies and classroom practices in the use of languages in multilingual classrooms in Fiji.

Jean Conteh reported on a study of the skills and knowledge of bilingual teachers (Punjabi and English) and the ways in which they mediated classroom interaction with their pupils in an English primary school. She examined the different kinds of knowledge and power available to the teachers and their pupils and the special space created by their bilingual discourse for the expression of particular voices. Tom Morton looked at the interaction between a trainer and trainees in guided lesson planning in a TESOL pre-service teacher education context. He investigated the dynamic interplay between the social and pedagogical norms created and maintained in the interaction between trainer and trainees, and the developing conceptualisation of aspects of language teaching on the part of the trainee.

Paul Seedhouse critically examined some of the cognitive constructs such as scaffolding or Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development through a detailed analysis of L2 classroom interaction. Using a Conversation Analysis methodology, he demonstrated how such constructs were 'talked into being' and how participants themselves oriented towards such constructs. Annette Duensing & Ursula Stickler presented a study of online tutorial interaction by the UK Open University's Languages Department. They showed how the medium of instruction interacted with pedagogical tasks in influencing the interactional processes of online language tutorials between participants in different physical locations. They also demonstrated the effects of new education technologies on the dynamics of teacher-learner relations.

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Gender and language: Theoretical and methodological approaches

School of Education, University of Birmingham, 18–19 November 2005

The two-day seminar was organised by members of the BAAL Gender and Language Special Interest Group (GaLSIG): Jane Sunderland (Lancaster University, UK), Lia Litosseliti (City University, UK), Helen Sauntson and Carmen Caldas-Coulthard (Birmingham University, UK), and Kate Segall (Roehampton University, UK).

The purpose of the seminar was to look at the different contributions (actual and potential) of several theoretical and methodological approaches to gender and language study, and to bring together researchers working in the field of gender and language within each of the following approaches: Sociolinguistics, Conversation Analysis (CA), Discursive Psychology, Ethnography/Pragmatics, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Feminist Post-Structuralist Discourse Analysis (FPDA), and Corpus Linguistics.

The specific aims of the seminar were: to identify and evaluate the special contributions of each approach; to explore the potential, value, and tensions inherent in combinations of approaches; to discuss the relationships between approaches and research questions, data types, data analysis and interpretation of findings; to explore, more broadly, the implications of changing paradigms in the study and teaching of gender and language.

There were 37 presentations, including keynote talks by Judith Baxter, Nigel Edley, Celia Kitzinger, Veronika Koller, Elizabeth Stokoe and Ruth Wodak. The presentations focussed on the purposes, capabilities and limitations of each approach, and of combinations of approaches (e.g. CA and Ethnography, CDA and FPDA). These were illustrated through analyses of gender and language in a variety of domains and genres, both spoken and written. Physical contexts included the classroom and the workplace, with papers focusing variously on gendered discourses in call centres, in social work, in different sorts of classrooms, and in workplace meetings. Specific text types analysed included men's and women's magazines, corpora, memos, business magazines, children's readers, legal texts, government and media texts on immigration, and online discussion boards. Some presentations focused on research within specific communities or cultural contexts, including the talk of Japanese girls (face-to-face, and in cyberspace), the Kotis community in India, British classrooms, workplace management committee meetings in Kenya, TV programmes in Botswana and Greece, and French adult literacy centres in Canada. In addition, there was a focus on talk, with papers analysing mixed-sex interaction, police interrogations, men's talk, interviews with Members of the European Parliament, girls' spontaneous talk, and trial/judicial discourse during rape trials.

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Some issues raised were key for all approaches: the difficulty of deciding if/when gender is relevant; the assumption of a degree of agency or intentionality in language use; the focus on micro/everyday and macro/structural levels of analysis; the importance of the role of the researcher; and the relevance of a critical or feminist politics. It was agreed that the notion of 'approach' has both theoretical and methodological dimensions, in that it is manifested in the theoretical underpinnings, research questions, and the collection, analysis and interpretation of data associated with a piece of empirical research. It was further acknowledged that an approach is rarely unified (e.g. there are several schools within CDA), that some approaches (e.g. CDA, FPDA) are more explicitly critical, problem-oriented, and complexity-oriented than others, and that not all approaches are necessarily complementary. Identifying what each approach is particularly well-equipped to achieve is the first step towards exploring complementarities (as well as tensions) between approaches, which will then guide the development of new theoretical and methodological paradigms.

The seminar was successful in bringing together gender and language researchers working from different theoretical and methodological perspectives, in outlining a longer-term research agenda for projects, and in generating ideas about future developments in the field. There are plans for feeding these ideas into future GaLSIG seminars, a presentation at the BAAL/IRAAL conference in 2006, and associated publications. An edited collection which includes selected papers from the seminar will be published in 2007 by Palgrave Macmillan.

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