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Colloquium – Alternative approaches to second language acquisition

Presented at the American Association for Applied Linguistics Annual Conference, Denver, Colorado, USA; 23 March 2009.

This colloquium aimed to describe approaches to second language acquisition (SLA) which do not share a mainstream COGNITIVIST orientation and compare these approaches. Presenters were asked to address the following six questions regarding the specific approach they were describing:

1. What are its distinctive features?
2. What are its underlying theoretical assumptions?
3. What research methods does it use?
4. What research findings support it?
5. How does it compare to the other approaches featured in this colloquium?
6. What are its future directions?

Dwight Atkinson introduced the colloquium by stating that the 'alternative' of its title was not meant to dismiss mainstream approaches, but rather to deepen and complement them. Because SLA is so complex and poorly understood we need diverse theoretical approaches; however, simply multiplying theories is insufficient – we also need to compare them.

In his presentation, 'Sociocultural theory and educational praxis: A dialectic perspective on L2 development', James Lantolf (Penn State University) stated that sociocultural theory (SCT) differs from its mainstream counterparts firstly in not regarding the individual as the exclusive site of SLA, and secondly in not viewing teaching/learning and development as separate processes – rather the former leads the latter. This is because teaching/learning is an artificial, quintessentially cultural activity. L2 teaching should therefore include what Vygotsky called 'scientific concepts' – here, specialist knowledge of how language works. Lantolf concluded his talk by suggesting future pedagogical directions for SCT vis-à-vis cognitive linguistics, private speech, and gesture studies.

Gabriele Kasper (University of Hawaii at Manoa) began her presentation, 'Conversation analysis as an approach to SLA', by explaining that the goal of conversation analysis (CA) is to show the orderliness of social interaction. Contrary to popular belief, CA has long been concerned with conversational/interactional development, and such development occurs through social practices being made public. Kasper next described CA's research methods: fine-grained analysis of the sequential organization of interaction. In principle, CA should be conducted by insiders and without reference to exogenous context, but these strictures are

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loosened for applied CA. Kasper then introduced supporting findings in three areas: SLA as a social activity, short-term development, and long-term development. Finally, after comparing CA to the colloquium's other approaches, Kasper described future research directions.

Diane Larsen-Freeman (University of Michigan) introduced her 'Complexity theory approaches to SLA: An emergentist view of language development' by reviewing complexity theory's (CT) theoretical background. CT studies nonlinear change in natural systems, reflecting the aphorism that 'the act of playing the game changes the rules'. Linguistic phenomena, including SLA, are viewed as complex systems – variability, adaptivity, and non-decomposability are central in this view. Larsen-Freeman next described three CT-compatible research methods: dynamical description, qualitative modeling, and microdevelopmental studies. Regarding research findings, she mentioned usage-based language acquisition studies, reinterpretations of mainstream 'restructuring' studies, and her own research as supporting a CT approach. Finally, after comparing CT with other alternative approaches, Larsen-Freeman mentioned individual differences, input frequency, and testing as deserving further research from a CT perspective.

Leo van Lier (Monterey Institute for International Studies) began his 'Ecology of language learning and teaching' by describing the ecological approach's conceptual background. He then discussed its theoretical assumptions: structure–process and mind–nature unity; action–perception connections; and semiosis. Van Lier next described the approach's research methods as multimodal, multisensory, multiscalar, observational, and interventionist. As supporting findings, he mentioned studies of action–perception, memory, first language (L1) development, and conceptual development (e.g., Slobin's thinking-for-speaking; Slobin 1996). Van Lier then discussed similarities and differences between this and other approaches. He concluded with future research directions: noticing and perception, multiple developmental scales, non-local contextuality, identity, and agency-institutional change connections.

Dwight Atkinson (Purdue University) began his 'Sociocognitive approaches to SLA: How mind, body, and world work together in second language learning' by insisting that SLA's 'messy' details fundamentally matter. Atkinson then described three theoretical assumptions behind sociocognitive approaches: (i) INSEPARABILITY – mind, body, and world function integratively in SLA; (ii) ADAPTIVITY – cognition principally supports adaptive activity; and (iii) LEARNING IS ADAPTIVE – learning is a primary form of ecological adaptivity. Regarding research methods and findings, Atkinson stated that little development has occurred, given the newness of sociocognitive approaches. He nonetheless described how multimodal analysis of interaction has been used to study SLA from this perspective, showing a video clip of EFL tutoring as an example. He then briefly compared alternative approaches, and concluded by stating that the future of sociocognitive approaches is undetermined.

Lastly, discussant Lourdes Ortega (University of Hawaii at Manoa) summarized the colloquium, stating that its general approach to the 'social' was a distinctive contribution to SLA studies. She also noted that SCT, CA, and CT had well-defined research foci, while ecological and sociocognitive approaches seemed broader. She ended by highlighting alternative approaches not featured in the colloquium – language socialization, identity, and critical approaches.

One purpose of this colloquium was to directly compare alternative SLA approaches, and, like most first attempts, it was only partly successful in this regard. Presenters generally

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emphasized family resemblances over differences, leaving fertile ground for future research and discussion.

Reference

Slobin, D. I. (1996). From 'thought and language' to 'thinking to speaking'. In J. J. Gumperz & S. C. Levinson (eds.), *Rethinking linguistic relativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 70–96.

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A research update from CILT, the National Centre for Languages, London

In the past decade or so there has been a well-documented decline in language[1] take-up among secondary school pupils of Years 10 and 11 in England (14–16-year-olds, also referred to as Key Stage 4 in the national curriculum for England and Wales) and there have been fewer UK-domiciled undergraduates or postgraduates studying for a languages degree (a decrease of 5.7% and 2.3%, respectively in the academic year 2005–06 by comparison with 2002–03 (CILT 2009). However, having tracked trends in language learning for over a decade and in the light of our various research initiatives, at CILT, the National Centre for Languages, we believe that there are reasons for restrained optimism about the future of the UK's national capability in languages.

We will describe here a small selection of recent research carried out at CILT to highlight some of the emergent positive developments in language learning and use in the UK. We will first summarise the latest surveys and statistical analyses concerning language take-up at secondary schools in England, focusing on Key Stage 4 (KS4 hereafter). Secondly, we will describe our research concerning National Occupational Standards for Intercultural Working, and the new Qualifications Strategy for languages and intercultural skills.

Language take-up at KS4

In the context of the National Languages Strategy (DfES 2002) and its overlap in timing with the government's decision to remove modern foreign languages from the core curriculum at KS4 with effect from September 2004, CILT elected to develop a model for the regular

[1] The term 'languages' here refers to any language other than the official languages of the UK which are English, British Sign Language and Welsh in Wales.

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