Review article

Selected research published in Spain 1999–2002

Graeme K. Porte Department of English and German Language, University of Granada, Spain

Introduction

In this first of a series of country-specific reviews of published research, my aim has been to highlight current lines of research in Spain which are either new in themselves or have taken their starting-point from existing international research agendas. In the preparation for this review more than one hundred papers were reviewed from over forty journals, conference proceedings, and books edited during the period 1999–2002. Inevitably, however, a 'selection' of recent research is just that. Demands of space are, of course, paramount but – in the light of the sheer volume of work published in Spain over the period – some kind of personal criterion inevitably needed to be used for the inclusion or otherwise of a paper. I have decided primarily to highlight experimental or quasi-experimental research which, though it might be based on, or targeted at, a local population or context, also has considerable interest for the wider readership of *Language Teaching*. Such a decision is not meant to imply a personal preference for such research over other kinds; rather I wished on this occasion to highlight what I perceive as a recent increase in interest in Spain in such studies. Many national university PhD programmes now include the production of an original piece of experimental research as an obligatory requirement of the course, and much of the research cited below has its origins therein. Conversely, this has meant that other, equally valid and commendable, published work has had to be omitted or mentioned only in passing. Amongst these are the numerous on-going reports on locally-initiated and government-funded research projects which are currently operating in many higher-education establishments, as well as teaching and learning materials production carried out with European Union (EU) initiatives. For example, current and recent *LINGUA* and *COMENIUS* projects in which there has been considerable Spanish representation include PINOCCHIO (the production of Italian language and culture materials for use in mainstream secondary education – University of Seville), SUBJECT PROJECTS (the production of plurilingual didactic tools for use in European secondary schools – University of the Basque Country), ARTEMIS (the creation of an advanced communicative course for L2 Greek– University Complutense of Madrid), and LEARNER AUTONOMY (an inventory of training needs and current practices for the teaching of learner autonomy in foreign language (FL) teacher training– University of Granada).

Dr Graeme Porte (email: gporte@ugr.es; WWW: www.ugr.es/~gporte) is senior lecturer in English Language and Applied Linguistics Research Methods at the University of Granada, Spain. His publications include The Tools of Writing *(from Comares/Madrid) and, most recently,* Appraising Research in Second Language Learning: A practical approach to critical analysis of quantitative research *from John Benjamins/Amsterdam.*

The last few years in Spain have seen continuous comings-and-goings as regards educational proposals and policy at secondary and university levels. Many of these recommendations and ordinances from ministerial level must have left more than one language teaching practitioner at times uncertain or confused. However, as Vez (2001) points out in his useful account of recent events and their repercussions on language education, there has been a palpably stronger consensus emerging in terms of ideas, attitudes, and assumptions about FL education in recent years in Spain which, taken together, have changed the former orientation of language teaching university departments, teaching centres, and language teaching associations and made them more open to new approaches and eager to explore current areas of debate concerning the FL learning process. Many scholars have seized on the chance to study the most recent trends in applied linguistics and their relevance to current language learning, teaching, and teacher training in Spain. Others have experimented with innovative methodologies in a local context (for a useful overview of events at secondary school level, see Madrid (2001) and at tertiary level Bruton and Lorenzo (2001)). These and other important developments are reflected in much of the research commented on below, in particular with reference to the sections on *Teaching*, *Cultural awareness,* and *Motivation*. Work on *Writing* and *Reading and vocabulary development* has demonstrated considerable interest in the study of individual and contextual variables influencing such processes. With EU educational directives increasingly highlighting the importance of attention to individual differences in FL education, it has been interesting to note

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a number of researchers (see *Strategies and learner autonomy*) voicing their reservations regarding the adequacy of current notions about learner autonomy and its application in the classroom. More extensive availability of computers in schools and access to the World Wide Web has encouraged several scholars to address the advantages and disadvantages of the learning medium (see *Application of new technologies*). Amidst what has often appeared to be a state of continuous turmoil in recent university entrance policy in Spain, several studies have turned their attention to test content and evaluative procedures (see *Testing and evaluation*). Finally, in *Teachers and researchers*, two studies address certain features of research report writing and the perceived gap between what is done by researchers and how it is applied in the classroom.

Teaching

Establishing and nurturing positive group dynamics in the classroom as a support for the second language (L2) acquisition process was the concern of a study by Arnold (2001). She argues that learners will not progress cognitively in the most effective way unless a satisfactory affectively positive group has been established. Her experiment sets out to explore the effects of holistic teaching (with its emphasis on group dynamics) on attitudes and performance of English learners. Two groups of 90 university students participated in the study and data were collected from pre- and post-treatment questionnaires, learning journals, field notes, and a taped interview. Arnold contests that the success of the project was best made manifest in the enthusiasm of the teacher and the students for the teaching/learning process. She cites and discusses the positive consequences for learning of cooperatively creating an atmosphere of common effort where all subjects were working together.

Scaffolding, deriving from Vygotskyan psychology and whereby the learner is helped to develop thought processes through expert-novice interaction, has also been the subject of research attention here. Esteve and Cañada (2001) believe that in the classroom community where there exists a collective objective, all participants may bring the kind of support and guidance to everyone else which improves the learning process. In their study they investigated how learners of beginner- and intermediate-level L2 French and German indulge in collective scaffolding during collaborative task-based learning. Analysis included episode identification, functional microanalysis, schematic analysis, and the categorising of function and event. Findings suggest that collaborative work at both levels of proficiency is the most important resource to enable collective scaffolding to flourish, although group negotiation was more evident in the beginners' group. The researchers also report more intense metalinguistic activity amongst the groups during the co-construction of new meanings.

The strategies the teacher uses to scaffold collaborative learner progress are the subject of a paper by Coyle, Verdú, and Valcárcel (2001). Data were collected longitudinally following a class of primary school children with the same teacher. A distinctive feature of the study is the exclusive focus on, and cataloguing of, teacher strategies which promote L2 English use, comprehension and retention, and classroom social interaction. A useful taxonomy is provided of macro-strategies promoting cooperative interaction and of scaffolding FL use in the classroom together with examples from transcripts of how these were used in lessons.

Mui Leng Tan (2001) argues for the introduction of what she terms Investigative-Oriented Learning (IOL) into foreign language teaching methodology. This is postulated as a means of developing investigative questioning in language learners so as to empower them with skills of conscious investigation, a process which aims to activate an awareness about aspects of language as well as language use. Such empowerment she sees as providing opportunities for language learners to develop strategies which can be transferred out of the language class itself. In this paper, after a detailed description of IOL, she focuses on a suggested methodology for using conscious investigation to heighten awareness of common idiomatic and metaphorical expressions in native British English.

Cooperative learning (CL) techniques were also studied over a year by Casal (2001) in a comparative procedure involving 65 students divided into three groups of adult English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) learners, two receiving CL techniques as a framework for developing reading skills while one acted as a control receiving a more traditional teaching approach. Data were obtained from oral interactions between subjects, measurement of teacher talking time, and pre-/post-tests of reading comprehension. Comparative data suggested that CL techniques, where social interaction and pair/group work are highlighted, offer a suitable framework for the development of reading skills to adults. The author also uses the outcomes to suggest that CL techniques have much to offer in secondary education classrooms, since they promote face-to-face interaction in the FL, positive interdependence among the pupils, as well as individual accountability.

Hewitt and Linares (1999) argue that Total Physical Response (TPR) approaches only exploit reaction to verbal orders and do not involve the student in oral or written L2 production. In an attempt to extend the basic tenets of TPR to the specific communicative needs of primary-school students, they report on a pilot study of a new course involving the use of psychomotor skills with 42 eight-year-old pupils of EFL divided into experimental

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and control groups. Primarily task-based in its methodology, the experimental course was written to reflect the same grammatical and lexical content as that which the control group normally received in their classes, but through psychomotor exercises. Data from proficiency tests, psychomotor tests, and questionnaires showed slightly higher overall academic achievement for the experimental group, and greater development for the latter group shown in the psychomotor tests applied. Particularly promising results were achieved in the subtest of segmental control, suggesting that sensomotor development and segmental control may be important requisites for L2 learning at this stage of development.

L2 teacher discourse is a type of modified discourse, like caretaker speech, mother talk, or foreigner talk. Teachers simplify their speech, trying to offer comprehensible input to their students in order to aid L2 acquisition. Torreblanca (2001) sets out to chart the differences found in the discourse of native and non-native teachers of English in a 26-hour corpus of EFL and English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classes. Using Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) Politeness Theory as the theoretical framework to account for language use, she analyses whether positive and negative feedback from these subjects shows significant differences with special reference to the teaching/learning context. Analysis of the corpus revealed that native teachers in a Spanish educational context use discourse features which are more akin to their non-native colleagues in similar institutions than to those native speakers in North-American educational contexts. Similarly, she highlights the use of indirect expressions and features of deference in the non-native sample, more careful than their native colleagues and more likely to avoid the use of imperatives. Thus, the institutional setting in which the teachers were working seems to be a major factor influencing their speech, perhaps even more relevant than their mother tongue itself.

Code switching is a very important issue for the class of EFL, where both teachers and students tend to use the target language for teaching, learning, or communicating. Sánchez and Martí (1999) note that little research on code switching has been carried out in FL classrooms and hypothesise that code-switching can occur in three roles: as a teaching strategy to explain meanings, as a learning strategy to ask about a lexical item in the target language (TL), and as a sign of in-group interaction. The researchers studied the transcriptions of 30 classes with 20 adult intermediate EFL students and one teacher and suggest that all three roles occur in inner speech (i.e., the language used to perform a learning task) and outer speech (i.e., the language used to communicate). Findings showed the teacher using code switching to explain the meaning of words, with a tendency for this to be used in controlled tasks and when a text is being introduced. Subjects themselves tended to use code switching to respond to questions about meanings and to confirm if their hypotheses about meanings were correct. As a sign of ethnic identification, code switching is posited as helping to create a friendly atmosphere in class. The authors conclude by suggesting that such language management occurs when teacher and students are all non-native speakers of the TL and both inner and outer speech is performed in that language.

Writing

To what extent do L2 writers use a formulation process of composition, whereby the transformation of meaning is generated by the writer into a linear chain of written language through certain operations? In two studies, Manchón, Roca, and Murphy (1999) investigated the evidence for two kinds of operation ('forward and backward') in 48 subjects at three different proficiency levels. Analysis of protocols confirmed that such operations can be broken down into a number of responses whereby the writer explicitly signals the initial nature of the problem and the strategies put into operation to solve it (forward operation) or considers the already-written text for either retrospective or prospective purposes (backward operation).

There has been a tendency in research to interpret L2 composition processes in cognitive terms and consider the social aspects of L2 writing as incommensurate with the former. Roca and Murphy (2001) attempt a more integrated interpretation of results in their discussion of recent research. Their critical analysis of the writing task environment, of the comparison between skilled and unskilled writers, and of the role played by education and training in writing skill development leads them to suggest a number of potentially fruitful areas for further research: in particular, their review calls for more harmonisation of cognitive and sociocultural theorising by producing accounts of how individuals—shaped by a social and cultural environment for their writing – interpret and construct the L2 writing task.

A number of studies have also looked at the effects of age on L2 writing. Much of the work on the effect of age variables on written L2 production has been carried out in natural contexts. The study by Doiz and Lasagabaster (2001) is different in that a school context is chosen. The aim was to see the effect of age variables on L2 written production when exposure time to the L2 is held constant. Their subjects were two groups of secondary school pupils who had been studying English for six years. Correction and analysis of the writings were based on variables of fluency, accuracy, and complexity, following results from the Wolf-Quintero, Inagaki and Kim (1998) meta-analysis of writing evaluation instruments. The hypothesis that older age pupils would obtain better

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results because of their more advanced cognitive state was confirmed.

There is little empirical research evidence available which addresses the written EFL performance of bilingual subjects learning the FL in a school context. In a study using a cross-sectional approach by Torras, Celaya and Pérez-Vidal (2001), an analysis was made of the written production of two groups of Spanish/Catalan (L1) school students ($n = 479$) who had begun their formal English instruction at different ages. The objective was to see whether the late starters achieved higher results overall than the early starters and whether data reflected the influence of the learners' two L1s. Both groups had had the same number of hours of instruction at the two data collection times when their written abilities were examined, namely 200 and 416 hours of instruction respectively. Starting age was found to have a clear influence on the scores obtained based on complexity, fluency, and accuracy. They confirm the hypothesis that older learners make faster progress than younger learners at both time periods. They also report subjects using both interlingual and intralingual strategies and suggest the latter may also be a product of subjects' capacity to juggle two already existing L1s.

Reading and vocabulary development

There is an implicit relationship in FL pedagogy between developing reading skills and increasing receptive language knowledge. However, Bruton (2001a) argues that some reading skills proposals emphasise orientations that actively discourage learner focus on language items. With special attention given to inferencing skills in dictionary use, he argues that training in dictionary use for reception is generally marginal to reading instruction and normally occurs through decontextualised tasks. In a critical review of the relevant literature, he concludes that learners should be made more aware of the relationships between reading and language development, allowing them to adopt flexible orientations according to reading and language learning purpose.

According to Codina and Usó (2000), while much is known about the importance of L2 knowledge and prior knowledge for the comprehension of a text, there is little agreement in the literature about the role each actually plays in the L2 reading comprehension process. In their study of 65 university students they analysed how far each contributed to overall successful comprehension of a text and whether ability level was an intervening variable in the outcomes. Findings revealed that L2 level has a greater influence on the comprehension of a specific L2 text than prior knowledge, and that lower-ability level students do not use prior knowledge in comprehension as much as higher-level students.

To what extent are training programmes in vocabulary learning strategies really effective? A study by García (2001) set out to measure the short and long-term effects with a group of 139 secondary school students in a study spanning three years. Three programmes of strategies were applied over three consecutive years, using experimental and control groups. The first two years of study are reported in this paper. In the first programme, the strategies were applied and measured independently; the main observed tendency was that when a new strategy was used by the experimental group, there was a decline in the short-term effectiveness, but in the long term the results were better than the control group. In the following year, the strategy training was applied in a general programme rather than applied separately. Here the tendency was the opposite: the experimental group had better results in the short-term tests than the control group, but the effect disappeared progressively. The author ventures a number of explanations for these outcomes and suggests ways in which the results might be applied in the L2 classroom.

Most psychological models of attention hold that the allocation of attention is an essential condition for encoding a stimulus into memory and that efficient retrieval depends on the quantity and quality of attention at the time of encoding. The focus of a brief research study by Salazar and Alcón (2001) was to determine the amount of comprehensible input shown in short-term memory vocabulary learning. Specifically, their assumption was that, through negotiation, L2 words would be highlighted, noticed, and subsequently encoded in long-term memory. Analysis of six Spanish secondary-school pupils completing three tasks over a period of one week showed mixed results: negotiation of meaning did increase comprehensibility of the meaning of new forms, but it did not appear to make the forms themselves more acquirable.

Metadiscourse is known to be an effective technique for improving writing and enhancing critical reading, and a means to make textbooks more reader-friendly. Yet little is known about the role of metadiscourse in listening comprehension, in particular the effect of markers on lecture comprehension. The main aim of a study by Aguilar and Arnó (2002) was to find out whether students perceive metadiscourse items and to what extent they use them to interpret input and whether they can articulate their knowledge of these when reflecting on their comprehension process. Thirty-seven students of engineering were divided into two groups and listened to a version of the same lecture, one with and the other without metadiscourse markers. A follow-up questionnaire, together with evaluation of the notes from these lectures, was

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used for data collection. Interestingly, the group exposed to the unmarked lecture did significantly better than the experimental group on the parameters considered. The researchers suggest that the effect of metadiscourse items on comprehension may be related to English proficiency level, since there was a high correlation between such proficiency and the note-taking task in the control group, absent in the experimental group. The authors also offer a number of possible explanations for the fact that students' perceptions did not coincide with performance, as those exposed to metadiscourse reported to have better grasped the overall structure of the lecture.

Cultural awareness

In an overview article on culture teaching theory, Martín (2001) offers a number of reflections on unresolved questions and issues. By breaking down culture teaching into several paradigmatic strands, he argues that many of the problems and issues surrounding the use of culture in FL teaching revolve around the difficulty of harmonising the different contributions these paradigms make to a comprehensive theory of culture teaching. In the final section of the paper, the author makes some pertinent criticisms of culture teaching in communicative methodologies and textbooks. A convincing argument is made for the need for a more intercultural perspective in L2 textbooks through which the currently patronising and condescending attitudes to many cross-cultural and social differences might be alleviated. He calls for language teaching to be adapted to the goals of fostering and reflecting a multicultural view and thereby helping the learner become more open to cross-cultural values.

What model of English should be taught? Prodromou (2001) takes up the challenge to teachers posed by recent corpus linguists, according to which we now know what real spoken and written English looks like and so 'real' English can and should be taught to EFL learners. While he agrees that the evidence for such 'real' English should not be ignored, he argues that language description and language pedagogy are not the same thing. To understand the challenge of such naturally-occurring English, we need to broaden the perspective and look beyond the language model itself to the uses to which the language form is put. Using this as the focus of his argument, he then goes on to examine the pedagogic implications of naturally-occurring English against the background of three phenomena: English as a global language, language as a social act, and the recent history of English language teaching. Drawing on his own research with students and teachers, he then presents data which aim to discover whether corpus-based models of language facilitate or make more difficult the process of language learning and teaching. In the light of these findings, a methodological framework is proposed which seeks to reconcile some of the contradictions identified in the earlier sections of the paper.

How far do variables such as the number of years exposed to FL teaching, gender, direct contact with TL speakers and/or student visits to the TL country affect or alter student attitudes to that TL and its speakers? These questions were addressed by Scheu (1999) in the case of university students of English with L1 Spanish. Data from personal interviews with 40 students, questionnaires and semantic differential procedures were submitted to comparative and qualitative study. Chi-squared analysis showed that, in general, subjects' attitudes were not significantly altered by any of the variables tested. In some cases, however, there were interesting differences reported: the variable of years of exposure to FL teaching seems to have affected attitudes towards considering English people more polite and very reliable. Similarly, within the relationship between the variable 'gender' and attitudes, results show that female students have a more positive attitude than male students regarding the way they observe the personality of the English. In the interview data, a large majority of students showed a medium or high ethnocentricity.

Pavón (2001), in his small-scale study of 41 Spanish-speaking university students of EFL, concentrates on the importance of the L2 learner's empathy with the TL culture and speakers. After selecting and analysing as homogeneous a group as possible on the basis of questionnaires and proficiency tests, his data do not evince a clear relation between the attitude variable and supposedly motivated students of English. Basing his suggestions on similar previous studies, it is claimed that such a variable probably has a greater influence on L2 acquisition in a natural context and that other variables, such as optimum age, cognitive style, or personality, carry more weight in such formal settings as the classroom.

Tarnopolsky (2001) makes an interesting argument for the necessity of teaching what he terms the communicative etiquette of English-speaking nations to students of EFL. He argues that the term 'speech etiquette' – often used to describe rules of speaking– admits only the verbal aspect of communication, yet all the accompanying paralinguistic features are also socially and culturally regulated. He then goes on to hypothesize seven main components of the communicative etiquette of a particular society. Through specific examples of these features, he suggests that a student of EFL may be said to have acquired sufficient communicative etiquette behaviour if his or her conduct while communicating in the TL meets all these general and specific norms/rules regulating verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication within the community. A number of practical suggestions are made based on an experimental course on the subject showing how

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these features might be taught within a communicative approach to language teaching.

Linguistic identity, claims Rajagopalan (2001), is largely a political matter, and languages are flags of allegiance. Through an historical discussion of languages and language loyalty, the author suggests linguistic identity is a function of the political climate prevailing in given societies at specific historic moments. Modern linguistics, it is argued, has systematically refused to admit that the primary conditions for a language to be recognised as such are political. He suggests that, if languages are to be viewed as outward expressions of national identity, time-honoured concepts such as 'mother tongue' and 'native speaker' should be approached as political rather than linguistic issues. It follows, the author concludes, that languages themselves may reveal themselves, on closer inspection, to be political entities rather than simply linguistic facts.

Motivation

A useful and thorough overview of L2 motivation research by Tragant and Muñoz (2000) highlights the need for longitudinal and ethnomethodological studies in which motivation can be tracked over time and in relation to the immediate educational context and any age differences. A new education bill in Spain (known as the LOGSE or *Ley Orgánica de Ordenación General del Sistema Educativo*) was implemented during the nineties, which brought the age of obligatory initial L2 learning forward from 11 to 8. The transition period between the previous bill and the introduction of the new one gave the researchers the opportunity to compare large numbers of pupils at different time intervals in the acquisition process, while keeping the number of class hours constant. The study used 532 subjects, those pupils having been eliminated who had been failed previous courses or had been exposed to significant amounts of English outside the classroom. This paper reports on the data relating overall attitude to English with factors such as the L2 starting age and the time spent studying the language; it also studies the relation between kinds of motivation shown and the age/school experience factor. It reports an increase in the amount of positive attitudes shown towards English according to the number of hours of class received during the study. The importance of instrumental motivation was particularly highlighted from 12,9 years of age but, in general, there were clear differences evidenced in the kind of motivation displayed according to the increasing class hours and the age of the pupils.

Avila (2001) takes as his starting point the fact that studies from psychology have indicated the cognitive potential of imagery by establishing the close relationship between mental imagery and motivation. He takes up the challenge of this potential in a study of the influence of mental imagery instruction on secondary school subjects' interest in reading in EFL. After an initial teacher- and student-training period in creating and exploiting mental images, he used specially-designed tests measuring student and teacher interest, interviews, and classroom diaries to record group changes in attitudes and interest. He concludes that there is a positive relationship established between mental imagery training and the subsequent interest stimulated in reading. Results also suggested that this interest extends beyond classroom reading to extensive reading too.

Madrid and Pérez (2001) hold that, despite the long tradition of research in human motivation, it remains a complex area to approach in FL classroom research. Citing a number of recent studies in Spain in the area, they suggest that exploring the way in which the teacher's and student's systems of beliefs impact on motivation can provide us with important clues to understanding motivational processes. They offer a model for future investigation of these processes, comprising three phases of the motivational process. Pre-action motivation reflects the subject's mental state when affected by possible needs and previous attitudes and beliefs. Action motivation depends on the former motivation and exerts its influence directly on the teaching-learning process. Finally, post-action motivation is shown when the subject has accomplished the goal to a greater or lesser extent. Initial results are provided from a number of classroom studies in Spain using questionnaires with which these different phases have been successfully measured.

Strategies and learner autonomy

Interest in the strategic aspect of L2 learning and the promotion of learner autonomy has also been reflected in research work recently published in Spain. A paper by Little (1999) makes the timely reminder that, even if the theoretical construct has been in existence for only twenty years, we are already facing growth problems inherent to the present model of learner autonomy. He contemplates the next stage in the process and formulates the need to broaden the scope of research to focus on strategies, counselling and cultural difference, the need to refine our concept of learner autonomy by developing the anthropological argument, and, finally, the need to establish a firmer bi-directional relation between research and pedagogy.

Taking up the first of these calls, Ribé (1999) argues that the concept of learner autonomy has existed for a considerable amount of time formulated in cultures which, having endured both political and educational oppression, became a fertile ground for multicultural pedagogical innovation. Through

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self-narratives of experiences and theory-building processes, he develops a practical implementation of autonomy through a conceptual framework of 'spaces' and what he refers to in Spanish as 'tramas' or complex forms of experiential learning. His aim is thereby to provide a construct which links practice, process description, contextual learner training and teacher development into one framework.

Despite the current wave of enthusiasm for promoting learner autonomy, there have been relatively few official curricula which have started adopting its recommendations within their stated objectives. Indeed, it was interesting to read a number of studies which strike cautionary notes as they assess the possible inconveniences of adopting or incorporating such a methodological principle. Lai (1999), in a research study of subjects at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, shows how her language learners are not necessarily psychologically predisposed to assuming a proactive mode of learning. Using data from a specially developed 'Self-directed Learning Readiness Scale' and a 'Self-direction in L2 Learning Measurement Scale', it was concluded that the learners' general readiness for self-directed learning might not be an overriding or the sole factor influencing the effectiveness of learner training for self-direction. Similarly, she reports that learners' proficiency level was not a determinant factor or key intervening variable in the subsequent development of self-direction in L2 learning through informed learner training.

Breeze (2002) reminds us that it is important to ascertain the degree of readiness of students for learner independence before major new facilities are provided on site. She adapted a questionnaire by Broady (1996) to provide an initial picture of language learning beliefs relating to learner autonomy within a group of 57 Spanish university intermediate-level EFL students. Although there was general acknowledgement that learners are responsible for their own learning and that independent work is valuable, many subjects appeared to hold views that might well clash with an eventual move towards greater autonomy. In particular, the researcher noticed high incidences of teacher dependence with a generalised preference for teachers to set content and course objectives. The author reflects on a comparison of results with British students and concludes with a number of pertinent observations concerning the feasibility of learner-guided study within a highly teacher-oriented secondary and university educational system.

There is a significant body of research available into learning strategies and the language learning process in standard learning contexts. However, as Hurd (2000) takes up in her paper, there is little which relates specifically to the experience of distance language learners. Using two structured questionnaires and a selected focus group discussion, Hurd surveyed 204 students from all over the UK following the Open University's French course L210. Subjects were asked their opinions of the learners support provided by the course and accompanying materials, what they perceive as the characteristics of successful distance language learning, the difficulties of such learning, and the strategies they use to improve learning. Detailed results widen considerably our knowledge base with regard to specific variables among distance language learners. The researcher notes surprise at the lack of reliance shown on study guides, given the importance attached to these as support for students. Furthermore, as regards good learner qualities, patterns changed from one questionnaire to the next: over time, students attached more importance to self-confidence and metacognitive skills and how these might help cope with the special difficulties of distance learning. Hurd concludes with the caveat that total autonomy for distance learners might be particularly unproductive for those who are unwilling or unused to self-direction in other aspects of their lives.

Application of new technologies

Read and Bárcena (2001) report on the development and implementation of an online English learning system under the auspices of the Spanish national distance-learning university (UNED). One of the main novel features of the website is its generative nature, in the sense that it goes beyond the provision of a set of finite exercises but contains a lexicon and grammar rules enabling it to produce an almost limitless set of example exercises. They describe four of the modules developed and used so far: a Virtual Secretary, built to explore the way in which information can be retrieved from websites, incorporating a bilingual natural language interface; a Virtual Verb Trainer, a self-generating system of sentences which is guided by in-built implicit syntactic rules and semantic restrictions; the Virtual Armchair Companion, a tool which advises students on suitable and available reading texts after assessing his or her current reading proficiency; finally, the Virtual Word Feeder, which helps the student to acquire new vocabulary by generating crossword puzzles from a lexical database, which is used to build new random puzzles.

The benefits of word-processing in L2 writing over time were demonstrated by Li and Cumming (2001). They start from the assumption that research comparing word-processing to pen composing tends to show positive results when lengthy terms of data collection are included and appropriate instruction and training are provided. In a longitudinal case study of a male Mandarin learner of English, they compared the processes and products of L2 composing while he wrote over eight months alternating between uses

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of a lap-top computer and pen and paper. Using key-stroke records and visual records of changes made on paper, together with think-aloud protocols, they summarise the advantages of word-processing over pen and paper in terms of a greater frequency of revisions made at the discourse and syntactical level, higher scores for content on analytic ratings of the completed compositions, and more extensive evaluation of written texts in think-aloud verbal reports. With time, the subject was able to use more functions of the program more effectively, and it is suggested that that this may also have changed certain aspects of his conventional writing later – particularly in terms of the kind and amount of revision made.

Although not dealing with what one might initially hope to understand by the application of new technologies to language learning, Miguel (2002) presents an unsettling review about the current state of 'ciberplagiarism'. Internet increases exponentially the number of available texts, which, along with the ease of manipulating them, implies that cyberplagiarism may become an all-too-customary practice for students. After making interesting insights into the practice of plagiarism and causes of its cultural acceptance in a number of societies, he goes on to propose a series of frameworks for its detection and prevention. A particularly useful section deals with specific clues to possible internet plagiarism which can help those evaluating student writing. These include mixing of styles within a text, formal visual aspects of the text on paper, or bibliographical references inconsistent with the current library facilities available to the author. The paper concludes with an opportune warning about the consequences of failing to stamp out such plagiarism, emphasising the part which local administrations have to play in its eradication.

Testing and evaluation

Although now firmly in its death-throes, the university entrance examination, known as the *Selectividad*, remains the subject of much political debate and continuing reform in the country, and, not surprisingly, several studies have questioned its continuing reliability and validity. With a sample of 450 subjects from the University of Madrid examination district, Herrera-Soler, Esteban and Amengual (2001) use holistic and analytic measures to demonstrate the poor discriminatory power of the objective elements in the test, where only the syntax subtext was found to be within any acceptable parameters. The relative superfluousness of the 'true/false' subtest is particularly highlighted, where nearly 80% of the subjects obtained a maximum score. Similar results on the lexical subtest lead the researchers to cast doubt on the overall validity of the examination. Two of the research team went on to use data from a subsequent sample to study the inter-rater reliability of the entrance exam. The hypothesis was that there were no significant differences in grading for place of work or sex of raters. The study suggests that, amongst same-sex raters, grades given by female secondary school raters are lower than those based at university, particularly in the case of the subjective sub-tests. However, reliability was more seriously affected with the 'sex' variable: among the university staff, grades were higher from the male than the female raters.

Within many continuous assessment systems, the relationship between effort, progress, and attainment is a constant source of preoccupation among teachers. But to what extent is effort recognised and rewarded, or its absence penalised, and how is effort identified? Bruton (2001b) describes initial survey data from 61 secondary school teachers of English who were questioned about the inclusion and grading of effort, implicitly or explicitly, in their continuous assessment of students. Almost all those questioned incorporated effort as a factor in assessment. The majority included effort as an implicit factor and much of the assessment is based on behaviour in the classroom. Those students who make an effort seem to have a clear advantage when it comes to grading decisions. Furthermore, Bruton suggests that conspicuous indications of effort in the classroom are perhaps being used by students to take advantage of such impression grading. Thus, effort as an assessable factor is plagued by inconsistencies, subjective judgements, and injustices, yet teachers persist in applying it.

According to Amengual and Herrera-Soler (2001), continuing controversy over the topic of acceptable teacher response to form and content has made it more difficult for non-native teachers who have had little or no formal training in assessment to judge the writing performance of their students. Certain tension then arises as teachers question the what and how of assessing student writing in an academic context. This study investigates how a group of five such novice raters respond to writing and how consistent are these grading practices. After simple comparison procedures, Pearson correlation was performed to determine the relationship between holistic and analytic scores. Little variability is reported; interestingly, results led them to hypothesise a tendency for raters to concentrate on, and respond negatively to, errors related to form for low performers while content was only rewarded in high performances.

Teachers and researchers

In a perceptive and comprehensive meta-analysis of recent classroom research methodology in L2 learning, Chaudron (2000) identifies a number of areas of weakness in current empirical investigation

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in the field. In particular, he criticises the internal validity of observations in many studies cited: he points out the importance of examining in detail additional data in classroom research such as those provided by mental processes or teacher/student perceptions by means of retrospective or discourse analyses. He also makes the timely observation that, in many of the ethnographic studies cited, conclusions about data are based on vague 'quantitative' expressions such as 'many', 'large quantities of', or 'significant' with no accompanying indication of how such measurements were effected. Finally, he laments the fact that, by concentrating on too small or specific populations, many studies still fail to achieve the external validity so desirable in the field.

Block (2000) reflects on what he sees as the growing gap between second language acquisition (SLA) researchers and language teachers in an insightful paper which considers how SLA publications often highlight issues of little interest to language teachers. He then goes on to explore why the gap may exist between the two, touching on differences in status, stances towards knowledge, and the attitudes towards different uses of language. He sees SLA researchers and teachers as essentially having different ways of working – tied up with an emphasis on language as denotation or connotation. Block goes on to evaluate the relative feasibility of four proposals which have been posited for bridging the gap: closed-collaborative research, action research, exploratory practice, and theory-practice mediation. In particular, Block doubts the value of action research, as it is difficult to carry out in practice: his own experience has demonstrated not only the problems which can arise when teachers carry out extra work for which they are not immediately compensated, but also the limited impact.

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Perhaps reflecting the growing interest in applied linguistics and language teaching, the number of FL teacher associations holding international conferences has been steadily increasing (e.g., TESOL Spain (English and foreign languages in general), GRETA-Andalucía (L2 English), AEPA-Madrid (L2 Spanish), APAC-Barcelona (L2 English), AEEA-Andalucía (L2 Spanish), and APIGA-Galícia (L2 English)). It has also been particularly pleasing to record the birth of a number of new, university department- or research group-based journals dedicated to one or more specialist areas in the field of language teaching, such as the *International Journal of English Studies* (University of Murcia), *Odisea* (University of Almería) or *Estudios de Lingüística Inglesa Aplicada* (University of Seville). These journals often see the light of day only as a result of considerable behind-the-scenes work in research groups financed by the autonomous governments. As this overview reveals, many such academic publications are attracting progressively more contributions from international scholars. There are also a number of other specialist journals that cover this field or often dedicate numbers to the study of FL teaching and applied linguistics, including *Anales de Filología Francesa* (L2 French – University of Murcia), *Cuadernos Cervantes* (L2 Spanish – University of Alcalá), *REALCE* (L2 Spanish – University of Alcalá), *CARABELA* (L2 Spanish– Editorial SGEL, Madrid), *GRETA* (L2 English – Granada), *Cuadernos de Filología Francesa* (L2 French – University of Extremadura), *Miscelanea* (L2 English – University of Zaragoza), *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* (L2 English – University of Alicante), and *Revista Complutense de Estudios Franceses* (L2 French – University Complutense of Madrid). In the light of such continuing enthusiasm and effort, it is particularly gratifying to have the opportunity to bring so many studies to the attention of a wider international audience through the pages of *Language Teaching*.

Having said this, I did note as a result of my research that – ironically – there would appear to be little inter-university exchange within Spain of such publications and there is an unfortunate and conspicuous absence of many national publications in several university libraries, although key international journals are comparatively well represented. From these pages, I would encourage editors to exploit the advantages of promoting local research agendas and production amongst both the national and international readership.

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