

Current Trends in Second Language Classroom Research

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My remarks in this lecture pertain to some of the recent issues in second language acquisition that arise out of research on language classrooms (summarized in Chaudron, 1988, but several newer points are made here). The bibliography lists a more extensive collection of readings dealing with all the major issues in language acquisition.

An overriding issue of importance in classroom research, as it should be in most research, concerns the appropriate choice of methodology. While there have typically been considered to be two general approaches to research, the qualitative and the quantitative, many researchers now agree that these two are not mutually exclusive, but rather, most research requires a careful blending of the two. Perhaps more important for classroom research is the researcher's attention to the reliability and validity of observations and analysis. These concepts apply regardless of the methodology adopted. Observational instruments in classroom research, for instance, no matter how "interpretive" or "objective", must be shown to be reliable, in the sense that another individual carrying out the same observation would come to approximately the same result. And furthermore, through a more complex sequence of tests, the observations must be shown to be valid (for more discussion on this point, see Chaudron, 1988).

One of the most investigated and interesting areas of classroom research has been that of "teacher talk". Following the logical argument that teachers' speech to second language learners is one of the key forms of input to which they are exposed, researchers have attempted to find out what characteristics of teacher talk make it more compre-

hensible, and therefore, easier to assimilate. This question is of course most critical if the teacher employs the target language as the means of instruction, but it can also be relevant to the extent that teachers' explanations or examples provide learners with properly focussed forms or rules of the target language. Figure 1 and Table 1 from an article by Chaudron & Parker illustrate some of the ways in which teacher talk can be modified to promote learner comprehension.

A second area of recent interest in second language classroom research is teacher feedback. A considerable amount of research is currently underway, investigating the extent to which teacher feedback (corrections) will alter learners' sequences of development. The findings to date suggest that in fact, there do seem to be effects of teachers' explicit corrections on learners' progress, but that these effects will depend on the teachers being aware of the forms most susceptible to correction. That is to say that learners will probably not be sensitive to correction on just any form; they must be at a stage appropriate to learn that form. So rampant teacher correction is not likely to be very effective. There are also important questions relating to the nature of teacher corrections, for as is illustrated in the figures and examples of feedback that follow, there are many possible courses of action, and some which may not succeed very well in focussing on the forms involved.

This issue is closely related to that of a focus on form. Larsen-Freeman & Long (1991) have perhaps the most detailed review of some of these issues, which revolve around the teacher's need to match the items in a syllabus with the sorts of units and items that learners are likely to learn. The historical concern for teaching formal aspects of a second language as isolated structures and rules is not at all justified by research on second language acquisition or classroom learning. The focus deserves to be more on encouraging learners' expression in order to achieve communication, and a focus on the formal accuracy of what was said would only follow as needed.

A similar amount of attention is growing on the topic of learner production and control over production. The argument is now widely accepted that learners need to produce a second language in order to acquire it adequately, although they should not be pushed beyond their communicative needs. In addition, as illustrated in the next table showing results of an experiment by Crookes (1989), learners will tend to produce more complex, and still just as accurate, language if they are given a chance to plan their speech ahead of time. This is a strong support for the argument that classroom time should be spent on planning and rehearsing more public presentations, in order for learners to polish off their production; this, instead of expecting fast-paced drill-like performance.

Probably the most familiar area of trends in classroom research in recent years has been the study of learner-learner, and teacher-learner interaction. Chapter 6 in Chaudron (1988) deals with this topic, as does the book by Day (1986), and a chapter in Ellis (1985). The list of types of interaction proposed by Bygate (1988) in the next example gives an idea of what sort of classroom actions are involved. The main point of this area of study is that learners must have an opportunity to interact with one another, as well as with the teacher and other native speakers of the target language, in order to learn how to communicate in the language. The interaction must also occur in true communication, where unknown information is learned through it.

One way to ensure that learners will have a chance to interact and communicate to learn new and real information is to adopt a more task-based orientation to teaching, in which learners engage in more natural real-life activities using language to achieve their goals. The literature on this topic is only now beginning to grow, but the outline by Pica, et al. (1990) in the final example illustrates the key ways in which one might differentiate between tasks of different types.

Without a doubt, the study of language classrooms research is growing and becoming more specific with respect to the focus of study,

but it has been greatly guided and influenced by the simultaneous research being conducted in the area of second language acquisition.

[References and examples follow]

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