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Is Classroom SLA Research Relevant to Classroom Practice?

A Language Teacher’s Point of View

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Abstracts
This paper reviews some classroom-oriented SLA research studies and examines the relevance of SLA research to practice in communication language classrooms. Close scrutiny of research findings shows that SLA research is strongly relevant in terms of availability, choice of tasks, and empirical support, while it is, at the same time, weakly relevant in terms of achievement targets. I recommend that language teachers should hold an “ambivalent” view of the relevance of SLA research to classroom practice.

Introduction

A recent rise in classroom-oriented SLA (second language acquisition) research gives the impression that SLA researchers are attempting to make tighter connections with foreign and second language education. Despite the emerging signs of confluence of SLA research and language education, practitioners have expressed complaints and disappointment, as is aptly described, for example, by Bolitho (1991) who notes that SLA researchers at conferences “blind an audience with science and …reveal research findings which are often derived from contexts quite alien to the majority of the listeners (p. 26).” Similarly, Crookes (1998) observes that “teachers sometimes grumble …about the inaccessibility of research-related discourses (p. 7).” Language teachers perceive that SLA researchers do not seem to care about communicating with them. In response to some of these criticisms, SLA researchers have recently posed some perspectives about the relationships between these two closely aligned but not-well-connected areas in applied linguistics (e.g., Crookes, 1997; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 1997a, 1997b; Lightbown, 2000). Nevertheless, these researchers do not scrutinize how particular findings of SLA research are relevant or irrelevant to actual classroom practice. Little heard in the journal literature are the voices of language teachers regarding the relationship between those research findings and classroom practice.

The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to critically appraise the relevance of SLA research to language education, mainly from a language teacher’s point of view. By reviewing recent findings in what is called classroom-oriented SLA research, I would like to pinpoint in what way SLA research can or cannot aid language teachers and classroom task implementation. Most SLA researchers take a prudent position in applying the research results to pedagogy and even caution against direct extrapolation of the findings to practice (see Ellis, 1997b). While keeping this in mind, this author intentionally takes this risk in order to address the question of relevance posed by language teachers.

To understand the relevance of research to classroom practice, ‘classroom-oriented SLA research on
grammar instruction and tasks’ is chosen for scrutiny in this paper. This type of research can be defined as studies that describe and explain language learners’ linguistic competence in relation to classroom grammar instruction and tasks. The reasons for choosing this area of research for discussion are three-fold: the research (1) is presumably, as the name itself suggests, highly connected with language pedagogy; (2) is a representative area of SLA research, and; (3) is a fast-growing area of research that has currently drawn much attention in SLA literature. Throughout this paper, hereafter, “SLA research” refers to SLA research on classroom grammar instruction and tasks; some of the arguments in this paper may not be applicable to other areas of SLA.

The Strong Relevance of SLA Research to Classroom Practice

Everyday, teachers constantly face an array of instructional decisions and cannot escape from having to select a few best alternatives from among the many possibilities (Richards & Lockhart, 1994). In planning lessons, teachers set goals and choose tasks to achieve those goals. They ask questions, in doing so, such as “what task options are available?” and “how can I choose one task over the other?!” Many teachers also ask themselves whether or not their own performance makes a difference, wondering “am I doing the right thing?”

These three questions contribute to the process of instructional decision-making, and what will be discussed here is that SLA research gives some insights into answering these questions. Each question corresponds to the three aspects of strong relevance that SLA research has to language classroom practice: availability, choice of tasks, and empirical support. These aspects, however, are by no means mutually exclusive.

Availability

The first question the teacher may ask in the planning stage is “what task options are available?” Although SLA research will be unlikely to provide options that are totally brand-new, it surely makes teachers aware of or raises their consciousness about available instructional options in a systematic way.

An excellent example of this is research by Foster and Skehan (1996). Some of their main findings suggest that learners’ accuracy, complexity, and fluency of linguistic output vary relative to pre-task planning and the type of task involved. For example, narrative tasks, where the learner is required to make up a story based on a series of pictures, facilitate fluency more than personal information tasks, where the learner gives a partner the information necessary to initiate an action such as turning off the gas oven that the speaker left on. This differential task effect on fluency drastically decreases when tasks are implemented with pre-task planning time. Accuracy, on the other hand, is not much more affected by either task type or planning time. That is, learners’ accuracy is relatively consistent across different tasks and planning conditions.

These findings are not particularly surprising; by manipulating an aspect of task characteristics, the teacher can have some control over the learners’ linguistic output. The real significance of the findings, however, is that the results inform teachers as to, for example, whether or not planning time is needed given the goal of instruction. In other words, when the teacher focuses on fluency in a particular lesson, allowing planning time is an instructional option that may be advantageous. Although far from conclusive, the results of this study certainly make the teacher aware of the availability of such options to choose from.
Choice of tasks

Another question the teacher may ask in the planning stage is “how can I choose one task over the other?” This question relates to the second aspect of the strong relevance SLA research carries to classroom practice—the choice of tasks. That is, SLA research provides suggestions for decision-making regarding task choice. Bygate’s study (2001) serves well to illustrate this point. The research question Bygate addressed concerned whether or not the repetition of tasks makes any difference on linguistic aspects of performance. Forty-nine learners of English were assigned to three different groups, each of which was basically distinguished from the others by the number of new and repeated tasks each group experienced; the narrative group practiced on 3 repeated narrative and 5 new narrative tasks along with a few interview tasks, while the interview group practiced on 3 repeated interview and 5 new interview tasks along with a few narrative tasks, and the control group practiced on a few of each of these tasks. Bygate used three linguistic measures—accuracy, fluency, and complexity—to quantify task performance. Among the findings were that fluency increased on repeated interview tasks regardless of treatment group, and the linguistic complexity increased on both repeated interview and narrative tasks.

An implication that can be drawn from this study is that learners improve some linguistic aspects of performance more through repeated tasks than on new tasks. This provides language teachers with some food for thought: whether to choose an old or new task. The result puts forth a rationale for choosing an already familiar task, especially when the instructional goal is to focus on fluency. This finding will guide a teacher’s planning decision in choosing a task.

The design-oriented theory of instruction (Reigeluth & Frick, 1999) deserves some comments at this juncture regarding how SLA research offers guidelines for choosing a particular task or an instructional option. This theory refers to a bundle of education theories that “offer[s] an explicit guideline on how to better help people learn and develop (Reigeluth, 1999, p. 5).” Instructional-design theories are prescriptive in the sense that they guide teachers toward what methods to choose to increase the probability of accomplishing given goals, and not in the sense that they determine that a particular method should be chosen without allowing other options or any variation. Instructional-design theories take into account a few important features of teaching such as conditions (what to teach, environment, desired outcomes), probability (by which Reigeluth means there is no guarantee of success, but merely an increase in the probability of attaining the desired outcomes), and value (or philosophy). What the results of the Bygate (2001), Foster and Skehan (1996), or Norris and Ortega (2000) studies offer seem to resemble what instructional-design theories intend. That is, the findings postulate the preference of instructional treatment: a certain option is preferable to others in attaining a certain linguistic outcome with a certain probability, given a certain goal. Information like this facilitates teacher decision-making in particular in the instructional planning stage.

Empirical Support

The final question which the teacher might ask “am I doing the right thing?” may not arise in the planning stage. It is rather during lessons or after the lessons when the teacher evaluates what s/he has been doing in class. This question relates to the final aspect of strong relevance SLA research has to language teaching, empirical support for classroom practice. An example of this point can be found in a recent meta-analysis study by Norris and Ortega (2000) who statistically synthesized studies that investigated what type of grammar instruction works best. They retrieved effect size estimates from 49 published studies, which compared the effects of different kinds of instruction on the acquisition of grammar. Included among the types of instruction were explicit (or deductive/metalinguistic) grammar instruction with accompanying tasks that focused on both meaning and grammar, implicit (or no explicit) grammar instruction with accompanying tasks that focused on
both meaning and grammar, explicit grammar instruction with the accompanying tasks that focused on only grammar, and implicit grammar instruction with the accompanying tasks that focused on only grammar. Their analysis of the treatment effects showed the following relationship:

- explicit & combined > explicit & form only > implicit & combined > implicit & form only; explicit instruction works better than implicit or no instruction, but the task type (combined or form only) overrides this effect.

Empirical research like this tests what language teachers practice in classrooms. And it is of considerable importance for teachers to understand whether or not their own theories of teaching (or pedagogical intuitions (Lightbown, 2000)) are supported by empirical testing. Empirical support allows language teachers to have more confidence in the choice of one instructional option over others and to justify a particular instructional choice they have made. In this sense, SLA research is strongly relevant to language teaching; it empirically tests what the teachers have been doing in classroom.

### The Weak Relevance of SLA Research to Classroom Practice

In contrast to the first section, this section explores how SLA research is not strongly relevant to actual language classroom practice. Here, discussion is limited to task-based communication class situations due to space. An aspect of teaching to which SLA research has weak relevance concerns achievement targets in lessons. Language teachers engage in constant decision-making, not only at the planning stage, but also during a lesson as well as after the lesson, hoping to lead students to success in language learning. Teacher actions during and after the lesson can be characterized as “the monitoring, interpretation, and evaluation (Woods, 1996, p. 133)” of what teachers have implemented in class (or interactive and evaluative decisions (Richards & Lockhart, 1994)). When they do take such instructional actions, they refer to critical criteria of student academic success, formally or informally, as achievement targets. Of great value here is a Stiggins (2001) framework of achievement targets, which can be applied to student performance in language classroom. The following five aspects comprise his framework: (1) knowledge and understanding targets, (2) reasoning targets, (3) performance skill targets, (4) product development targets, and (5) dispositional targets (see Table 1).

Knowledge and understanding targets are prerequisite to all language performance on task. Without knowing vocabulary, idiomatic phrases, grammar, and some factual/topical information required in tasks, learners can not carry out a task in the first place. Reasoning targets concern the ability to use the knowledge in order to solve problems and figure things out in performing a task. For example, in a group discussion task, reasoning targets can be actualized in how to negotiate with others to reach a consensus, come up with some supportive evidence, and defend a position using the evidence. With performance skill targets, learners demonstrate their ability to skillfully perform a communication task, mainly drawing on the two antecedent targets. Product development targets are any form of quality products that meet certain key criteria. In communication-oriented language classrooms, this can be a list of reasons gathered from the group members, or a map with missing information filled in. Finally, dispositional targets concern student development of attitudes, interests, self-concept, values in relation to academic success. Every single teacher, supposedly, wishes to foster, through the lesson, positive attitudes toward and interest in learning the target language. Although, in the language classroom, each target may not be easily separable from others, this framework helps to understand what teachers consciously or unconsciously assess as successful learning in the classroom.
Table 1

Achievement Targets in Communication-oriented Classrooms

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<tr>
<th>Achievement Targets</th>
<th>Definitions</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge &amp; understanding targets</td>
<td>mastery of substantive subject matter content, where mastering includes both knowing and understanding</td>
<td>vocabulary, grammar, some factual / topical knowledge needed to complete a task</td>
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<td>Reasoning targets</td>
<td>the ability to use that knowledge and understanding to figure things out and to solve problems of task</td>
<td>logical procedural skills to complete a task (including functional aspects such as comparison, analysis)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Performance skill targets</td>
<td>the development of proficiency in performing a task</td>
<td>performing conversation, dialogue to complete a task</td>
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<tr>
<td>Product development targets</td>
<td>the ability to create a tangible product</td>
<td>final products based on task performance (e.g., lists, maps)</td>
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<td>Dispositional targets</td>
<td>the development of certain kinds of feelings including attitudes, interests, motivation</td>
<td>positive or negative concepts and behavior towards tasks, the class, studying (e.g., “the task is enjoyable,” “it’s worth doing!”)</td>
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Adapted from Stiggins (2001, p. 66).

For an SLA researcher like Skehan, the achievement target of main concern may be a linguistic one, which is evaluated through measures of accuracy, complexity, and fluency (Skehan, 1997, p. 129). Similarly, for SLA researchers like Doughty or VanPatten (e.g., Doughty & Varela, 1998; VanPatten & Cadierno, 1993), an indication of success in language learning lies in the correct use of focused grammar. In the Stiggins framework of achievement targets, linguistic outcomes such as accuracy and complexity seem to fall mainly in the knowledge and understanding targets, while fluency falls into the performance target category. It is clear then that other targets (reasoning, product development, and dispositional targets) are usually not of great focus in SLA research. Although these linguistic aspects certainly play a critical role in successfully completing communication tasks in language classrooms, achievement targets that language teachers need to take into account may be broader in perspective. Language teachers, during a lesson, may ask questions relevant to all of the achievement targets such as

- Do students need more information?
- Do I need to increase student involvement in this activity?
- Am I teaching too much rather than letting the learners work it out for themselves?

(Richards & Lockhart, 1994, p. 84)

- Do the students proceed on the task as I intend?
- Does the task arouse students’ interest?
- Do the final products look as I planned?

SLA research, which concentrates on and has a fundamental focus on linguistic data, only partially addresses achievement targets that teachers aim for. Informative and prospective as they may be, the suggestions SLA research can offer, then, are restricted in scope.

An SLA study by VanPatten and Cadierno (1993) further exemplifies this point. They compared a production-based instructional treatment with a comprehension-based instructional treatment. Subsequent to the exposure to the explicit presentation of the target grammar, the production group practiced through oral and
written tasks focusing on form, meanings, and communication, while the comprehension group practiced through receptive tasks such as listening and reading. The results indicated that the comprehension group did better than the production group on the three interpretation posttests, and the comprehension group did as well as the production group did on the three written production posttests, thus implying that comprehension-based instruction may be superior to production-based instruction.

For the sake of argument, let us take the results at face value and consider the application of these results to classroom practice. The first point concerns achievement targets. Even if the results of VanPatten and Cadierno’s (1993) study indicate that the comprehension approach is superior in terms of knowledge targets, a teacher may prefer choosing the production approach, given dispositional targets. This is because the interaction among students demanded in production tasks may generate a friendly, collaborative atmosphere and arouse more interest. Or because sticking to the similar receptive tasks of the comprehension approach throughout a lesson may increase boredom among students. Note that my purpose here is not to cast a doubt on their research finding, but to illustrate how a language teacher may opt for other targets in instruction. Teachers may justifiably prioritize dispositional targets, for example, if those are their achievement targets of focus. It is also justifiable given that there is accumulating evidence in support of a theoretical position that “sustained deep learning is …highly dependent on affect, emotion, and motivation (Schumann, 1997, p. 35).”

Another point that illustrates the weak relevance of the research findings to practice lies in the contrast between statistical significance and pedagogical significance. Statistical significance, often used and abused to enhance the validity and generalizability of research results, is not equivalent to pedagogical significance. In VanPatten and Cadierno’s (1993) study, for example, the statistically significant mean difference between the production and comprehension groups was about 4.0 points on the 10-point interpretation tests. Whether or not this statistically significant difference is pedagogically significant requires further consideration. In other words, the teacher should question, before adopting a solely comprehension approach, whether or not a 4.0 increase on comprehension tests is consistent with the achievement targets.

A final note regarding achievement targets concerns whether or not teachers place equal emphasis on each of them. The answer is clearly no (for example, see a study on teacher decisions by Johnson (1992) cited in Richards and Lockhart (1994)). It probably depends on the course, curriculum, and teacher’s assumption and beliefs. Some teachers may place more emphasis on grammar and vocabulary rather than actual performance. Or it may even hinge on the goal of a specific lesson. Achievement targets primarily guide teachers to instructional decision-making, but there are various other factors involved in what the teacher decides to do in class (see Woods, 1996). Moreover there are gaps between the teacher and learners in the meaning of success in learning (Matsuda, 2003) and between the intention of tasks and student interpretation of the intention (Kumaravadivelu, 1991). The relationships between achievement targets and teachers’ decisions are complicated and are beyond the scope of this paper.

To summarize, all aspects of achievement targets may play an important role in teachers’ decision-making process in language classrooms, although the degree of focus on a particular target varies depending on pedagogical, personal, political, or other reasons. A limitation of the research findings such as those of VanPatten and Cadierno (1993) and Norris and Ortega (2000) when applied to the classroom, is that the preference for an instructional option is based solely on the goal of maximizing the students’ acquisition of linguistic skills, mainly those related to knowledge targets and, in part, performance targets. While one instructional option may be considered preferable to others in terms of these targets, there are other targets which the teacher may wish to aim at. That is, the teacher may opt for an instructional option which may be more appealing in inducing student enjoyment, facilitating cooperation among peers (dispositional targets), providing more chances for practice (performance skill targets), and helping students to produce a quality product (product development targets).
Even though SLA research states that a particular instructional option is preferable to others in light of a linguistic goal, other targets require equally significant attention and consideration in the classroom. What SLA research can suggest then are preferred instructional options in light of primarily linguistic-based targets, not of achievement targets in a broader sense.

Conclusion: An “Ambivalent” View

In her millennium anniversary paper published in *Applied Linguistics*, Lightbown (2000) noted a student in a teacher training program, who asked “…[D]o you really have to do research to show that it is better for students to get a mixture of communicative interaction and form-focused instruction? Doesn’t everybody know that? (p. 433).” I believe such disillusionment originates in some wrong expectations held by language teachers. SLA research will probably never be relevant in such a way that it will offer drastic changes in classroom practice, or that it will offer entirely new types of instruction. Many language teachers do not realize this fact, expect too much out of SLA research, and hence become disappointed.

So where are we now? Given both the strong and weak relevance of SLA research to classroom practice, teachers should embrace an “ambivalent” view of the relevance of classroom SLA research to language education: the findings of SLA research are both strongly and weakly relevant to language teaching. Research can help make teachers in the planning stage more aware of available instructional options and understand reasons for a particular task choice; it can empirically test teachers’ theories. It is weakly relevant to classroom practice when considering the wide array of achievement targets teachers need to take into account. On the one hand, SLA research has systematically accumulated a large knowledge base on learners’ linguistic development, which should form a partial basis for pre-service language teachers’ programs. On the other hand, much of classroom SLA research, with its narrow attention to linguistic outcomes, may present findings that practitioners perceive as obvious, and thus be less informing for those who are looking for innovative teaching tips.

This ambivalent view of relevance can assist language teachers to judge the applicability of SLA research findings. When the language teacher reads and hears SLA research findings, it is useful with this view in mind to ask such questions as “What instructional option does this research finding make available?” “How does this research finding help my choice of tasks?” “How does this research finding empirically support what I’ve been doing in my class?” “How does the research finding help my class in terms of achievement targets?” And, “Is this research finding still significant, given the achievement targets I’ve chosen for the lesson?”

Notes
1See, for example, Brown (1995), Genesee and Upshur (1996), and Nunan (1988), for relevant concepts of achievement targets such as goals and objectives in language curriculum, syllabus, and instruction.

2See Ellis (1999) for a discussion of the studies that followed up on those of VanPatten and Cadierno (1993).

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