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Editorial

Language instruction and language acquisition: A complex interplay

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Language instruction is a process whose aim is to provide opportunities that can assist the acquisition of a second language (L2). The effect of instruction, however, is highly variable and complex, mediated by a multitude of factors including the context of the teaching, the type of structure, and various individual learner differences such as learners' age, motivation, attitude, aptitude, levels of language proficiency, etc. Although the effects of these variables and their interactions are intricate, many researchers have argued that they play an important role in language acquisition. Therefore, a significant amount of SLA research has been devoted to the study of these variables.

Instruction itself is also multifaceted and can comprise a wide range of instructional strategies that differ from one another in important ways, such as the type of instruction, mode of instruction, its timing, its intensity, and the degree of planning. For example, instruction can be explicit or implicit. Explicit instruction presents learners with overt information about certain grammatical rules and how they work. Implicit instruction, however, refers to the kind of instruction that makes learners conscious of language rules or what they are supposed to learn. Instruction can also be formal or informal. Formal instruction takes place in classroom settings with an instructor. Informal instruction, however, is learning that occurs outside the classroom, such as at the work place, home, or other informal settings.

When it comes to the role of instruction, an important question is whether there is any difference between different types of instruction. Another key issue is whether the nature of the setting affects the learning outcome. Learning a first language takes place mostly implicitly and informally through exposure to the language in naturalistic settings. Thus, the question becomes whether adult L2 learners can also learn through informal exposure or whether they also need instruction. Research seems to suggest the L2 learners can benefit from both informal exposure and instruction. However, the amount of learning and the type of knowledge developed depend not only on the nature of instruction but also other factors including the various individual learner factors. Within individual learner differences, for example, motivation, attitude, anxiety and other personality characteristics have often been considered to be key factors in influencing L2 learning. These factors have also been shown to impact learning outcomes regardless of the context in which

learning takes place. Learners' age is another major variable that can influence the degree of L2 competence. This factor may also play a role in the degree to which learners respond to instruction or learn in formal versus informal settings.

This issue of the journal contains five articles, all of which address important instructional concerns. One of them deals with the role of instructional context, three examine instructional treatments, and the final one focuses on teachers' professional development.

Tragant, Serrano, and Llanes report a study that examined the role of instructional context by comparing learners' language learning experiences and improvement in two different learning programs among young learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Two groups of learners participated in the study: one that attended an informal overnight summer camp where they were mainly exposed to English during non-instructional activities and another group who attended a formal language school program. The study used a pretest–posttest design using both oral and written tasks to measure learning. Both programs were found to facilitate L2 development, with the amount of learners' progress being similar in the two settings, although some additional effects were found for the summer camp in improving learners' oral production.

Prosic-Santovac examined the degree to which teaching materials, particularly authentic media materials, including popular cartoons, affect L2 child acquisition and their level of motivation. The study used a case study design in which the learning progress of a four-year-old learner was evaluated during a period of 18 months. It was theoretically motivated by the notion that teaching materials for young L2 learners should be highly motivating and provide opportunities for immersing learners into the content. The learning materials used consisted of a popular preschool animated television series and related character toys. Three kinds of measures were employed: a vocabulary test, observation records, and a structured interview. The results showed a positive effect on learning outcomes and also on the learner's level of motivation. One strength of the study is its longitudinal nature collecting data from an individual learner over a relatively extended period of time. One limitation, however, as the author pointed out, is that the data come from only one learner, who was also in a literary-rich home environment. Therefore, it is not clear to what extent the findings would apply to other learners in other home environments with different socioeconomic characteristics. Another issue is the occasional tendency to make statements that sound like generalization beyond the context in which the study has been conducted. For example, the study concluded that cartoons can be used as 'a powerful language instruction tool as their use can raise learners' motivation level'. While such statements may be true in their own contexts, given that the study is a case study, generalizations to 'learners' are not warranted and should be treated cautiously.

The next two studies examined the effect of instruction on L2 pronunciation. A notable feature of both studies is that they have focused on an area that has not received much attention in pronunciation research, that is, the learning of suprasegmental features. This focus is significant given the importance of suprasegmental skills in both speech perception and production.

Saito and Saito examined whether instruction targeting suprasegmental features affect L2 comprehensibility as well as the development of word stress, rhythm and intonation,

among beginner level EFL learners. Two groups of learners, an experimental and a control group (each consisting of 10 students), participated in the study. The results provided positive support for the role of instruction. Thus, the authors concluded that suprasegmental-based instruction facilitates the development of L2 phonological ability. One strength of the study is its attempt to assess the differential effects of instruction on different aspects of L2 suprasegmental learning. One limitation, however, is the small sample size. In addition, learning was measured by a paragraph reading task rather than a speaking task. Therefore, the study does not tell us much about the extent to which instruction can affect learners' suprasegmental abilities during communicative tasks or spontaneous speech production. This issue, thus, merits investigation.

Gluhareva and Prieto examined the beneficial effects of gestures in the development of English rhythm using a pretest–posttest within-group design. The study involved rhythm training sessions using videos in which an instructor produced a series of target phrases with or without beat gestures. The participants watched the videos and then their accentedness was rated and compared by a group of native speakers of English in pre- and post-training tasks. The study showed a significant impact of beat gesture observation on learners' development of native-like rhythm. These effects were also found to interact with the difficulty of the items, with the training session having more effects on learning more difficult items than easy items. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of rhythm training for learning L2 pronunciation and also confirm that the beneficial effect of such instruction depends on the nature of the target structure. One extension of the study, as the authors pointed out, is an examination of the effect of gesture production rather than gesture observation.

In the last study, Davin, Herazo, and Sagre examined how teachers' practices changed as they attempted to implement a particular teaching approach, that is, dynamic assessment (DA). Participants were four L2 teachers who attended professional development workshops to use DA in their classrooms. Following the workshops, the teachers implemented DA in their lessons, reflected on their practices, and received feedback from the instructor. Each lesson was recorded and then analysed. The results showed an effect of the professional development training in DA in that the teachers tended to use more DA strategies in their lessons following the DA workshops. However, the degree to which the teachers appropriated DA also varied across teachers. Overall, this study demonstrates that DA training can have a positive effect on teachers' classroom practices.

The five studies reported are all carefully designed, well executed, and also theoretically and pedagogically motivated. As noted, three of them address the role of instruction, and one deals with instructional context. To this end, they address different age groups, ranging from child language learners, to pre-adolescents, to adult learners. They have also used different research designs, from observational, to experimental, to case studies. Despite these differences, one common finding is the evidence for the overall beneficial effect of instruction as well as the complex interplay between instruction and other mediating variables.