

Can SLA research and ELT practice be of benefit to each other?

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Abstract

This paper examines implicit beliefs about language learning through a critical analysis of foundation English language course descriptions at Thai universities. Course descriptions provide an overview of the broad goals and methods for specific English language learning contexts. Critically analyzing such descriptions allows us to identify how course designers view the nature of language and language learning, and these views can be compared with the research literature on second language acquisition (SLA) and language learning. The data examined come from 22 foundation English language courses at nine of the largest public universities in Thailand. The data were analysed for word frequency, thematic categorization, and collocations. The findings show that language learning is viewed as the acquisition of skills rather than knowledge; a variety of approaches to language learning are used; skills learning involves building on existing abilities, knowledge learning involves giving, and understanding involves enabling; and little attention is paid to attitudes and non-language objectives. These findings were compared against the literature on SLA and language learning using six recently published texts. The methods used to teach English at Thai universities largely reflect the language learning research literature, but the objectives of teaching are rarely considered in the field of SLA. If SLA research is to have practical implications for language teaching, more attention needs to be paid to the learning of language skills.

English language teachers would like to teach in ways that are most effective, yet there appears to be little consensus among teachers on the nature of effective teaching. Perhaps then, teachers could turn to the research literature to guide them in identifying ways of teaching effectively. However, in the field of language learning and teaching, the relationship between research and practice is unclear. For researchers in areas such as second language acquisition (SLA), gaining deeper understandings of learning processes through research may be a more immediate concern than ensuring that research has practical applications. Many teachers view such research as ivory tower theorizing and would like researchers instead to provide concrete suggestions to improve classroom practice.

This gap between theoretical research and classroom practice has, historically, been a cause for concern and attempts to bridge the gap have been made. For

instance, the stated goals of the international conference on Foreign Language Learning and Teaching held in Bangkok include:

"Aiming to narrow the gap between theory and practice, the conference brings together SLA theorists with classroom teachers to engage in a productive sharing of research findings and an exchange of ideas."

(Thammasat University, 2009)

Such a goal assumes that SLA research has implications for the classroom teaching of English and that English language teaching (ELT) practitioners can usefully inform the agenda of SLA research. The validity of these assumptions is questionable.

The relationship between SLA and ELT

There has been surprisingly little discussion of the nature of the relationship between research and practice for ELT which focuses on the content of the research. Two notable exceptions are Hoey (2003) and Long (2007).

Examining linguistics research in general rather than focusing specifically on SLA research, Hoey argues that several key areas of research have been stimulated by problems arising in ELT. His examples include research into text types which originated in an examination of the discourse problems ELT students encounter in writing and how teachers can address these problems, and corpus linguistics which was initially driven by the need to design dictionaries for language learners. On the other hand, he argues that ELT shows almost no evidence of being informed by linguistics research. This is especially the case for ELT textbooks whose objectives are based more on tradition than on research and whose sample texts bear very little relationship to authentic uses of language. For Hoey, then, research has benefited from ELT, but ELT shows little influence from research.

Specifically focused on SLA, Long argues that research has produced findings of use to ELT practice. His examples include research into L1 transfer as a way of understanding and addressing errors, and research into the effects of different ways of giving negative feedback. In contrast to Hoey, then, Long sees ELT as benefiting from research.

Neither Hoey nor Long provides much concrete evidence for their arguments. In this paper, I will attempt to provide some preliminary evidence about the relationship between SLA research and classroom practice by comparing the findings of SLA research with the descriptions of ELT practice contained in course descriptions.

The data

The first stage in comparing SLA research and ELT course descriptions is to identify the main findings from SLA research. There are several ways in which this could be done. For instance, the key findings in articles reporting SLA research could be summarised, but there are hundreds of such articles published every year and not all are likely to have an impact on ELT teachers.

Instead then, the findings from the most cited articles only could be used. However, these articles are written for an audience of SLA researchers and it is unlikely that many ELT teachers would read them. The most likely way of disseminating SLA research that would reach ELT teachers is books providing an overview of SLA findings. Such books have presumably already filtered the whole field of SLA research to identify those aspects which are of greatest importance. Examining the book contents, then, should provide an idea of what SLA researchers identify as the most important issues in SLA. Six books were chosen on the bases that they were published by major publishers in recent years and that they have been cited by other authors at least 20 times. The books are:

- Foley and Thompson (2003) *Language Learning*
- Lightbown and Spada (1999) *How Languages are Learned*
- Long (2007) *Problems in SLA*
- Mitchell and Myles (2004) *Second Language Learning Theories*
- Saville-Troike (2006) *Introducing Second Language Acquisition*
- Scovel (2001) *Learning New Languages*

The contents of these books were analyzed to identify what the authors see as the key areas of content to be taught/learned in language learning and the key ways in which language learning is conducted.

The concerns of SLA research then need to be compared with ELT practice. In trying to identify the main concerns of ELT, a broad overview of these concerns across a large number of contexts is needed. Such a broad overview can be found in the course descriptions of English courses. Therefore, the descriptions from 22 foundation English courses at 9 major public universities in Thailand were used as data. The descriptions ranged from 24 words to 178 words in length with a total of 1,146 words. These descriptions were analyzed in terms of word frequency, thematic categorization, and collocations. The themes used for categorizing the data were the content of teaching both in terms of language objectives and non-language objectives, and the methods and activities used. The most frequently occurring words from the word frequency data were placed into these categories, and, where applicable, verbs collocating with the objectives were identified. It should be noted that the findings concerning the practice of ELT are restricted to the practice of ELT at Thai universities at the curricular level, so several potentially important issues, such as classroom atmosphere and specific teacher behaviors, are not covered in this study.

The concerns of SLA

The most noticeable concern of SLA in all six books is the heavy focus on the linguistic features of language. In SLA terms, language learning is seen as the acquisition of phonology, syntax, morphology, semantics, lexis, pragmatics and discourse (e.g. Foley and Thompson, 2003; Mitchell and Myles, 2004). Even within this focus on linguistic features, the majority of work in SLA concerns the learning of grammar points. Thus, SLA discourse typically

consists of phrases such as "where an L2 structure or rule ..." (Saville-Troike, 2006). Furthermore, the research generally assumes that the learners have never been exposed to the linguistic features previously.

While understanding the learning of the grammatical features of a language is important, other language learning goals are all but ignored. Most notable in its absence in the SLA literature is the learning of language skills. Only one of the six books (Saville-Troike, 2006) includes sections devoted to skills learning, and references to language skills in the indexes of all six books are very sparse. Indeed, one leading SLA researcher has noted that "unfortunately, skill development is seriously understudied in SLA" (VanPatten, 2004: 43). For the content of language learning, then, SLA has a heavy focus on the learning of grammar at the expense of other objectives.

Turning to how language is learnt, SLA has produced a plethora of learning theories, such as innatist learning, acculturation, accommodation and the Resultative Hypothesis. Within recent SLA research, two theories predominate: social interactionist learning, and focus on form (in a task-based approach) which can also take the form of the implicit – explicit learning distinction. Unlike many of the other theories, these two theories have clear implications for language teachers. A social interactionist perspective emphasises the role of interaction (either among students or between the teacher and the students) in learning and thus has implications for the use of groupwork and the ways in which teachers interact with students (e.g. through scaffolding). The research into focus on form suggests that a task-based approach where the initial emphasis is on meaning, rather than form, may be beneficial for learning. However, much of the research from these two theoretical perspectives examines very specific instances of learning. For example, within an interactionist framework, there has been substantial work on the effects on learning of different ways of giving corrections on student mistakes (such as through recasts). While such work may provide useful guidelines for how teachers should behave in the classroom, it has little to say of value concerning higher-level decisions in language teaching, such as how curricula should be organised.

The practice of ELT

From a word frequency analysis of the course descriptions, it is clear that English teaching at Thai universities places a much heavier stress on the learning of skills than on the learning of linguistic features. In terms of general descriptions of the learning content of the courses, *four skills* occurs 21 times, *learning strategies* 6 times, and *language knowledge* only 3 times. More specific descriptions of learning content reflect this pattern: *reading* occurs 22 times, *writing* 19 times, *listening* 14 times and *speaking* 9 times, whereas *grammar* occurs only 6 times and *vocabulary* only twice. Other linguistic aspects, such as *phonology* and *discourse*, never appear in the course descriptions. It would therefore appear that, at Thai universities, the learning of language skills, especially reading, is heavily prioritised over the learning of language features.

The contrast between language skills and language features also applies to how the course descriptions view the nature of learning. Examining the verbs that collocate with skills and features suggests that the nature of learning is different. For *skills* (and the four specific skills), the predominant collocating verbs are ones that imply that learning involves building on existing abilities (e.g. *develop, improve, strengthen*). For *language knowledge* and *grammar*, the verbs imply a transmission method of teaching where no existing knowledge is necessary (e.g. *provide, equip*).

The methods and activities for learning given in the course descriptions are eclectic, ranging from the control of *grammar exercises* and *practice*, through *strategy training*, *process writing* and *small-group learning*, to the freedom of *task-based learning*, *mini-projects* and *self-access learning*. Similarly, while the course descriptions from seven of the universities predetermine the learning objectives, for two of the universities students can identify at least some of the objectives themselves (e.g. *students work on their own, at their own pace and based on their own interest in their preferred time*). It would therefore appear that there is little consensus concerning how students should learn.

Finally, in addition to language objectives, some of the course descriptions include non-language objectives, such as *information searching*, *cultural understanding*, *critical thinking*, *lifelong learning skills* and *positive attitudes*. While the frequency of mention of such non-language objectives does not reflect the emphasis placed on them in the National Education Act (Office of the National Education Commission, 1999), it does suggest that the universities view language learning as more than learning language.

Discussion

The findings show some contrasts between the concerns of SLA research and those of ELT practice which are summarized in Table 1. It should be emphasized that these findings only cover broad concerns and do not consider specific issues. The content of learning in SLA research is largely taken to be linguistic features, especially grammar, and research into the learning of these features generally assumes that students know nothing about the features prior to the research. The two main theories guiding the understanding of how people learn language are social interactionism and task-based learning, each of which has implications for teachers at the level of specific classroom behaviours. In the course descriptions which illustrate ELT practice, language skills are taken to be a far more prominent aspect of the content of learning than grammar or other linguistic features, and it is assumed that students already have some level of ability in these skills before learning. The ways in which the teaching and learning process is conducted are eclectic, including social interactionism and task-based learning among a wide range of other approaches. Finally, language learning in ELT practice involves learning non-language objectives as well as language objectives.

<i>Area of concern</i>	<i>SLA research</i>	<i>ELT practice</i>
Language objectives	Linguistic features, especially grammar	Language skills
Ways of learning	Social interactionism and task-based learning	A wide range of eclectic methods
Other objectives	Not considered	Non-language skills, thinking, attitudes

Table 1: Summary of the differences between SLA research and ELT practice

A key question is whether such differences matter. In other words, are ELT and SLA different unrelated ways of approaching the same issue (language teaching and learning) or should ELT and SLA be related and inform each other? Statements such as SLA "is concerned with the role that instruction plays in L2 acquisition" (Ellis, 2009: 33) suggest the latter, but this quotation can be interpreted in two ways. From a more pedagogic perspective and in line with the concerns of ELT, the statement could mean that SLA is concerned with how actual teaching influences L2 acquisition; but from a theoretical research perspective, the statement could mean that SLA should investigate more theoretical influences of instruction on L2 acquisition in situations where variables can be controlled.

At present, SLA researchers appear to take the second interpretation of the quotation. In other words, SLA researchers examine how controlled variables affect acquisition and try to avoid the inherent messiness of real classrooms. This interpretation means that, up to now, SLA research can provide a few useful insights for teachers in the form of guidance on specific classroom behaviours (such as giving feedback) and possibly on how to teach grammar, but has little to say regarding the concerns described in ELT course descriptions.

If SLA research hopes to provide broader and more practical guidance for ELT, the comparison of ELT course descriptions and SLA research conducted in this paper highlights three areas which SLA research needs to add to its current agenda. First, there is clearly a need for more research into the acquisition of language skills. Second, research in all areas should account for how learners build on pre-existing knowledge rather than focusing on the creation of new knowledge. Third, SLA research needs to acknowledge that language objectives are not the only possible goals in learning language. Several ELT researchers have identified a range of possible non-language objectives including interpersonal skills, sociopolitical skills, affective goals, and culture (Genesee and Upshur, 1996; Graves, 2000; Richards, 2001, 2002). Some of these non-language objectives may be related to some learning theories from SLA (e.g. interpersonal skills may be important in social interactionism), and research in SLA based on such theories could investigate these non-language objectives alongside the language features which such research traditionally examines.

If the scope of SLA research were to be expanded to include these areas, findings could be of more direct practical benefit for ELT. In suggesting this, I am not arguing that the current concerns of SLA should be replaced; rather, they can be supplemented by additional concerns. Since these additional concerns are derived from an analysis of ELT practice, this suggests that Hoey's position that ELT can benefit SLA is justified. However, if the scope of SLA research is expanded, we can reasonably hope that the findings will be of direct benefit to ELT, and thus Long's position that ELT can benefit from SLA will be more fully realised. In other words, expanding the scope of SLA to more directly address the concerns of ELT could lead to synergistic benefits for both disciplines.

About the author:

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