Key concepts in language learning and language education

Diane Larsen-Freeman

Introduction

In this chapter, I identify key concepts in language learning and language education. Rather than attempting to compile a comprehensive inventory of concepts, undoubtedly limited by my own experience, I have chosen a generative, question-posing approach, one that I have made use of over the years to situate developments in the field. It is in answering these questions that the key concepts emerge, a process I will illustrate by offering a few answers to each question. In order to bring some coherence to my discussion, I will adopt a heuristic in the form of a triangle (Figure 11.1).

In the top angle of the triangle, there is the teacher, who does the teaching. In the lower left angle, there is the subject matter. In the case of language education, this has meant the language and usually the culture in which it is embedded. The lower right angle of the triangle refers to the language learners in the process of doing the learning. The triangle is situated within a context, broadly interpreted to mean any place, situation, or time in which language education takes place. For instance, it could be in a national context or a more local classroom context with a particular group of students at a particular period of time, etc. Contextual factors affect answers to the questions, as do the prevailing theories at a particular period of time. In other words, there are no absolute answers to these questions at any one time or over time, and I make no claim that more recent evolutionary phases are necessarily superior to those which preceded them. Yet, even though the questions have not always been explicit nor their answers absolute, in this chapter they provide a useful framework for identifying the key concepts in the evolution of language learning and education.

History

What is language? What is culture?

Languages have been taught and learned for centuries. Over the years, circumstances have differed, resulting in one or more of the angles of the triangle being more influential than the others. Even within a given angle, the questions have not always been accorded equal
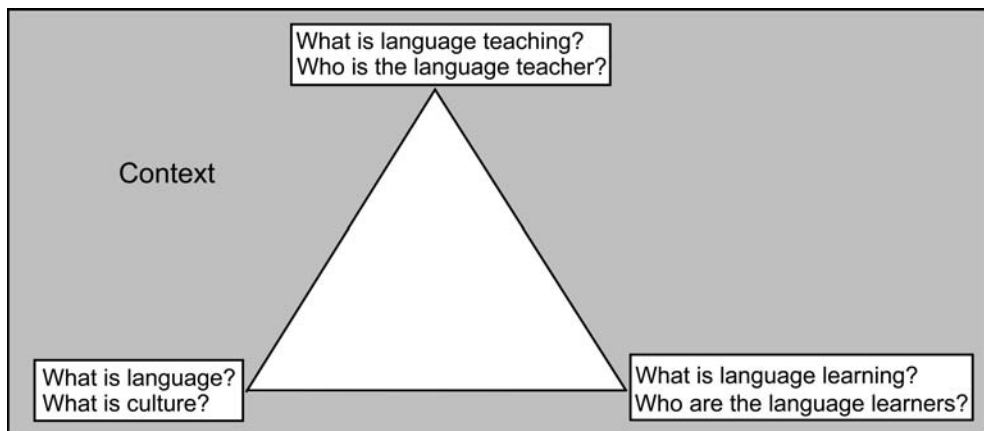
Figure 11.1 Questions related to key concepts in language learning and education

treatment. For instance, in defining the subject matter, language educators have sometimes stressed the inseparability of language and culture, and sometimes ignored treatment of culture altogether. The latter has been the case, for instance, given national needs during times of war because it has been assumed that explicit treatment of culture could be sacrificed in order to train proficient speakers and listeners of a 'strategic' language in as expeditious a manner as possible. Another example, this time with regard to the rise of English as an international language, has been the assumption that one can learn English for utilitarian purposes without becoming bicultural. However, for many applied linguists, language and culture are inextricable, where culture means the way that people express themselves and interpret the expressions of others as they share a social space and history (see Kramsch, this volume).

What then is language? Becker (1983: 219), a linguist, has written that 'Our "picture" of language is the single most important factor … in determining the way we choose to teach it.' Of course, even if this is so, it is not always the individual teacher who defines language for pedagogical purposes. It is often the curriculum designer or materials developer who has more say. Still, the answers to the question have had a formative influence on language education, either directly through the textbook author's interpretation of language or the teacher's, sometimes tacit, assumption about its nature. After all, we teach something as we understand it ourselves.

Yet, Langacker's observation (1968: 3) of four decades ago still holds true:

> Despite its prevalence in human affairs, language is poorly understood. Misconceptions are legion, even among well-educated people, and not even professional linguists can claim to understand it fully. A person is radically mistaken to assume that the nature of language is self-evident or to conclude that we know all about a language just because we speak it.

Thus, the answer to the question 'What is language?' is by no means straightforward.

Cook and Seidlhofer (1995: 4) offer a number of answers to the question:

> Language is viewed in various theories as a genetic inheritance, a mathematical system, a social fact, the expression of individual identity, the expression of cultural identity, the

outcome of dialogical interaction, a social semiotic, the intuitions of native speakers, the sum of attested data, a collection of memorized chunks, a rule-governed discrete combinatory system, or electrical activation in a distributed network.

Their list is far from exhaustive (the authors do not claim otherwise). And, of course, these definitions are not all distinct in that several are implicationally related or apply to different levels of scale; nevertheless, it is easy to see even from this selective rendition that there is quite a range of views concerning language. Indeed, they are sufficiently distinctive to inform different approaches to language teaching and learning. For purposes of illustration, and because they are responsible more than any for pendulum swings in the field, let me now contrast two of Cook and Seidlhofer's characterizations of language: 'language as a rule-governed discrete combinatory system' and 'language as social fact'.

The former emanates from a formal or structural view of the language system. Its appearance on the modern scene can be traced to the writings of Saussure (1916), considered by many to be the founder of the discipline of linguistics. Interested in establishing linguistics as a science, Saussure chose to focus on the synchronic system of language, in particular *langue* (the abstract system of the shared code), as distinct from *parole* (the individual utterances of speech). Unpacking the definition 'language as a rule-governed discrete combinatory system', we see that language is a system, a system comprised of discrete segments: phonemes, lexemes, morphemes. These forms combine to make words, phrases, clauses, and sentences that comply with an established set of word order rules. Traditional, structural, descriptive, and generative linguistics have all adopted and contributed to this understanding of language. In language education, formal views are responsible for grammatical syllabi, in which linguistic structures are sequenced and graded according to increasing linguistic complexity. Formal views of language have also inspired pedagogical practices such as the use of inductive and deductive grammar exercises in which a grammar rule is discovered and practised, respectively.

It is not difficult to see that the view of language 'as a social fact' contrasts with a structural perspective. The social-fact view of language was propelled in part by Hymes' (1972) call for language education to move beyond linguistic competence to communicative competence: the knowledge of when and how to say what to whom. Focusing on language use, this view privileges language functions and meanings over language forms. Functions or speech acts such as promising, complaining, and inviting replace the structures of grammatical syllabi, and together with notions such as modality and temporality, make up notional-functional syllabi. Functional approaches to language have been realized in communicative language teaching approaches, widely practised these days.

In addition, a functional view of language includes how texts are organized to realize the meaning potential of language (Halliday 1978), stylistics or the distinctive patterns and choices people make when using language (Widdowson 1992), how different registers and genres are patterned (Swales 1990), how various conversational moves are structured (e.g., conversation openings and closings) (Sacks *et al*. 1974), how these are performed differently in different speech communities/cultures, the work of cross-cultural pragmatics (Blum-Kulka *et al*. 1989), and how the use of language differs across professional and academic contexts (Candlin and Candlin 2003).

In addition to endorsing communicative language teaching and notional-functional syllabi, then, a functional view also holds implications for teaching reading and writing and for realizing one's educational and professional/occupational ambitions. Of course, the dichotomy, formal versus functional, is an oversimplification, but I have evoked it to support my claim that it is important to understand the implications of a definition of language. Clearly, each

member of the dichotomy is far more complicated than first seems. Also, it is fair to say that most language educators attend to both forms and functions, although a satisfactory interface between the two has been elusive. While most people accept that ultimately the purpose of learning a language is to be able to communicate, the question of whether it is better to prepare students to communicate by having them build up a repertoire of lexical items and structures or by having them launch directly into communicating, however falteringly, has been at issue.

The problem with the former is that it leads to the inert knowledge problem. Students acquire a great deal of declarative knowledge or knowledge about language, but little by way of procedural knowledge, how to do things with language, especially when they attempt to use their knowledge for their own purposes outside of the classroom. The problem with a communication-first approach is that students speak and write with a great deal of inaccuracy. Moreover, a structural approach has the advantage of being compositional, in that the discrete pieces of language form natural syllabus units. On the other hand, dividing communication into discrete lessons is not easy, due to its protean nature (Larsen-Freeman and Freeman 2008). Even when communication is made divisible, say with inventories of functions and notions or language-use situations such as ordering food in a restaurant, opening a bank account, buying a bus ticket, etc., how to sequence units in a logical and pedagogically sound manner is not a straightforward matter.

Of course, as I have just written, many teachers teach their students both structures and how to communicate; however, even under these circumstances, by treating them separately in a given lesson, it is left to students to figure out how to apply their knowledge of grammar rules while communicating. One proposal that has been made to integrate the two includes focusing on grammatical form, not adopting a synthetic grammatical syllabus, but rather an analytic one (Wilkins 1976), where students engage in meaningful activities. During these, the teacher is encouraged to focus students' attention on form fleetingly, in a way that would not disrupt communication, e.g. by recasting or reformulating a student's error (Long 1991). Providing such 'negative evidence' is considered to be an important function of language teaching. Another proposal involves a procedural or usage-based approach to teaching grammar, 'grammaring' (Larsen-Freeman 2003), which calls for students to engage in dynamic, psychologically authentic practice, working not only on the form of grammar structures, but also on what they mean and when it is appropriate to use them. Gatbonton and Segalowitz's (1988) creative automatization is also a potential solution in that in their approach, it is patterns that are practised in meaningful communication, not grammar rules or structures.

I have chosen but two of the definitions from Cook and Seidlhofer's list: formal/structural and communicative/functional. I will not be able to venture further with the others on the list, let alone discuss views of language that are not represented there. However, one in the latter category that bears mentioning for its formative influence is the view that language serves the purpose of empowerment. Critical discourse analysts (Fairclough 1995) have pointed out that language is not a neutral medium of communication, which has led to a heightened sense of the political dimensions of language teaching and use (see chapter by Norton, this volume). One way that this view has been made manifest in language education is through a problem-posing approach, based on the work of Brazilian educator Paolo Freire. In a problem-posing approach, students are encouraged 'to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves' (Freire 1970: 64). The goal of a such an approach is to help students to understand the social, historical, and cultural forces that shaped the context in which they live, and then to help empower students to take action and make decisions in order to gain control over their lives in that context. For instance, one pedagogical practice

involves the selection of real-life issues from students' experience, the creation of short dialogues based upon these issues, and the engagement of students in an open-ended process of problem-solving.

What is learning? Who are the learners?

Turning now to the second angle of the triangle, we find the question 'What is learning?' Again, many answers to this question have been proffered. Certainly the most prominent answers in recent memory have been drawn from the theories of behaviourism, innatism, interactionism, and emergentism.

One version of behaviourism (Skinner 1957) has it that learning takes place through operant conditioning. There is no mental process involved; instead, learner behaviour is reinforced in order to condition a voluntary response to a particular stimulus. Key to this approach is the behavioural shaping, such as learning to make a new sound, that comes from selective reinforcement. Structuralists, such as Bloomfield (1942), had already introduced the idea that learning took place through habit formation. When language is construed as verbal behaviour, acquired through habit formation, it seems that the best way to learn a new language in the classroom is to 'overlearn' it – i.e. learners should practise the new patterns of the target language so thoroughly that they can choose the appropriate forms of the language while focusing their attention on the meanings they wish to express. Practices such as 'mimicry-memorization' (Bloomfield 1942) and pattern and dialogue practice (Fries 1945) became common.

Innatism entered the scene with Chomsky (1965). Chomsky questioned how it was possible for a child learning its native language to induce the rules necessary to produce grammatical sentences, given the impoverished input to which the child was exposed. There had to be, he reasoned, some innate faculty, a Language Acquisition Device (LAD) that guides the child in the language acquisition process. Without it, the child would generate countless hypotheses about the rules such that the induction problem would be insoluble, certainly within the time it normally takes a child to acquire his or her native language. Although the specifics of the LAD have changed over the years, perhaps the most productive contemporary description is that the LAD consists of innate general principles of language, which the child has to then but tune to the ambient language, said to involve a process of parameter-setting. Not much by way of pedagogical implications has followed from this position, but it has inspired considerable research in second language acquisition as researchers seek to establish the principles of a universal grammar (UG) and to discover whether they are still accessible during second language acquisition, in which case learners would then only have to learn to reset the parameters.

Chronologically, interactionism followed thereafter. Interactionists (e.g. Snow 1979) believe that it is not necessary to appeal to an innate LAD to explain the facts of language acquisition. They could instead be accounted for by looking closely at the interaction between the child and its caregivers, and the support the latter provides. For instance, even neonates engage in 'conversations' with their caretakers, with the latter making particular accommodations to facilitate language acquisition. The interactionist explanation has been extended to second language acquisition (Long 1996; Gass 1997). As native speakers and non-native speakers of the target language interact, language acquisition takes place, providing that native speakers accommodate non-native speakers, thereby making the input easier to comprehend (Krashen 1982).

In language education, a similar motivation applies to the use of meaning-based or task-based syllabi (Prabhu 1987; Willis 1996). The thinking goes: If communication is the end goal, why not make communication the means as well? Making communication the means calls for

language students to engage in meaningful communication, such as using a map in order to give directions in the target language to some geographical point of interest. The goal is not to focus upon language forms or functions explicitly, but to solve some problem or to accomplish some task. Out of the interactions involved in performing the tasks, language is learned.

A more recent view of learning, inspired by seeing language from a complexity theory perspective (Larsen-Freeman 1997) as a complex adaptive system (Ellis and Larsen-Freeman 2009), has been called emergentism (Ellis and Larsen-Freeman 2006). Also rejecting the idea of the need to posit an innate LAD, emergentists argue instead that humans are well suited to perceive and to assimilate the patterns in the language spoken to them (and therefore the input is not as impoverished as Chomsky maintained). Emergentists have demonstrated that both children learning their native language (Goldberg 2006; Tomasello 2003) and adult learners learning a target language (Ellis and Larsen-Freeman 2009) can 'bootstrap' their learning by attending to frequently occurring form-meaning-use constructions in the language to which they are exposed. Learners build categories around frequent prototype exemplars, and from the categories extract the semantic and pragmatic information that allows them to analogize beyond the forms they have encountered. Frequent and reliably contingent form-meaning-use constructions are made more available to the learners through a social process of co-adaptation, an iterative process, with each interlocutor adjusting to the other over and over again (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008). Emergentists (and connectionists) assert that this way of looking at learning finds empirical support in the architecture of the brain. With each new instance of meaningful language the learner encounters or uses, certain neural connections are strengthened and others atrophy, creating a dynamic, interconnected network of language-using patterns in memory (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008).

Remaining in this angle of the triangle, but moving on to the question of 'Who are the language learners?', it should not be surprising that any answer to this question is multifaceted as well. Certainly, even a cursory response to this question would include learners' ages, the native or other languages that they speak, and their individual differences. Taking these one at a time, starting with age, it was hypothesized by Eric Lenneberg (1964) that there is a critical period for language acquisition, usually ending around the time of puberty, after which a first language is no longer learned in a normal way. Most applied linguists accept that there is no absolute age threshold when the shift takes place, but they do point to the decrease in brain plasticity after puberty (or perhaps a bit earlier) to explain the apparent differences between the learning of languages by younger and older learners and the differential success of the latter. Of course, this hypothesis is not without controversy; nevertheless, it is difficult to argue that adult learners approach the challenge of learning another language in exactly the same way that children do, if only because the circumstances surrounding the learning are discrepant.

Furthermore, it is also well known that the native language that a learner speaks can make an impact on the way that the second language develops. This observation is supported by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, in which it is proposed that language determines thought. A more modest and more recent proposal, 'thinking for speaking', comes from Dan Slobin (1996). For Slobin, the native language does not determine thinking, but instead acts as a filter through which the world is perceived and registered. Even advanced second language learners, therefore, while otherwise producing accurate L2 utterances, may, at the same time, evidence L1 syntactic patterns. Brian MacWhinney (2006) attributes the L1 patterns cloaked in L2 words to the 'neural commitment' that L1 speakers have already made to their the native language. The neural connections made and strengthened over the years in the brain act as a deterrent to the acquisition of native-like L2 skills.

Of course, L1 language differences are embedded in L1 cultural differences, and these, too can have a profound effect on language education. To cite an obvious cultural difference with regard to language education, the way that languages are taught and mastered in Asia is much more text-and-memorization based than the way that it is taught elsewhere (Li 1998). Then, too, in many parts of the world, students are likely to expect, and even demand, that attention be given to grammar (Schultz 2001). Such differences have led certain applied linguists to warn against 'exporting' language teaching methods from Western countries to others (Holliday 1994).

It should also be noted that since its genesis, the subfield of SLA has adopted a bifurcated research agenda, which features both questions about the nature of the SLA process and about learners' differential success. There were four individual differences that were attested to influence language learners in 1976 (Schumann 1976), seventy-four in 1989 (Spolsky 1989) and now there are more likely over 100, as the list keeps growing. These factors are varied and range from innate language aptitude (Carroll 1963), to motivation (Gardner and Lambert 1972), to affective factors such as social attitudes toward the target language group (Gardner 1985), to learning style differences (Gardner 1983), to the preference for different learning strategies (Oxford 1989), to the circumstances of learning (i.e. as a second or a foreign language), and to the goals or needs of the learner.

To exemplify the last point, it is increasingly common to find heritage speakers in language classrooms these days. For these learners the language of the home is different from the ambient language and the language of the school. Nevertheless, heritage speakers have not had an opportunity to master their home language and so seek to do so through formal instruction. Having had some exposure to the language, at least in the language spoken around them, their needs are different from other learners who have no prior experience with the language they are studying. For instance, heritage speakers might understand the language, but not be able to speak it, or may be fluent orally (at least around certain topics), but not have developed literacy skills in the home language.

Such an observation underscores a critical issue in the field of language learning and language education: to what extent it is possible to make generalizations about learners apart from the circumstances of, and reason for, their learning? As Kramsch (2002: 4) has put it:

> It is no longer sufficient to talk about 'individual differences' in SLA against the backdrop of the universal learner. Difference and variation itself have moved to the center of language acquisition research. Variation becomes the primary given; categorization becomes an artificial construct of institutionalization and scientific inquiry.

It is common knowledge that there is a great deal of variation in L2 learner performance. Given the number of variables involved and the fact that they interact dynamically, influencing a learner in different ways at different times (for instance, motivation is not a steady state, but is characterized by ebbs and flows [Dörnyei 2009]), the question then becomes whether or not the variation is limitless and the experience of each individual learner unique. Perhaps if we are content to talk about tendencies, patterns, and contingencies, rather than absolute predictions and generalizations, then although individuals follow different trajectories in learning a second language, there may be some patterns that supersede the individual level (Larsen-Freeman 2006).

Another tension in the field of language learning has been the one between those who believe the learning process is essentially cognitive and individual, the learning by individuals of a mental grammar, and those who believe that learning is essentially a social enterprise (see,

for example, Lafford 2007). Although most educators would again feel that both cognition and social interaction play a part, the important question of how they interface remains (Larsen-Freeman 2007).

What is teaching? Who are the teachers?

Visiting the final angle of the triangle, I begin with 'What is teaching?' As readers will have come to expect, there are different answers to this question as well. A traditional view of teaching has been characterized as 'knowledge transmission'. In this teaching-centred view, teachers are seen to be responsible for transmitting what they know to their students. These days it is common to be critical of a knowledge transmission view of teaching for the passive role it ascribes to language learners. Freire (1970: 72) has referred to knowledge transmission in terms of a banking metaphor: the teacher makes deposits of information into students who are to receive, memorize, and repeat them. However, knowledge transmission remains a common practice in many parts of the world. A skilled teacher's organization of knowledge can help students understand and remember what has been transmitted.

In contrast to knowledge transmission is a prominent alternative, student-centred, view of teaching, namely constructivism. The American philosopher of education John Dewey (1916) is generally considered to be the founder of constructivism. Like Freire, Dewey rejected approaches that construed learners as receptacles of the teacher's knowledge. In its place, Dewey believed that learning should be socially constructed and teaching meaningful, building on what students already know. This should be accomplished through active engagement with fellow students, the teacher, the world and by reflecting on these experiences. For this reason, a constructivist approach could also be called 'experiential'. Practices associated with this approach are procedures in which students are active thorough experimentation, problem-solving, and dialoguing. Students are also encouraged to reflect upon these experiences by talking about what they did and what understanding they came to.

Another answer to the question about language teaching comes from sociocultural theory, inspired by the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky, in common with Freire and Dewey, saw the importance of social interaction in education. In fact, according to Vygotsky, it is through social interaction that higher order thinking emerges. The 'place' where this is most likely to be facilitated is in the 'zone of proximal development or ZPD', 'the distance between the actual developmental level [of the learner] as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers' (Vygotsky 1978: 86). More capable peers (and teachers) aid or 'scaffold' learners in the ZPD, thus contributing a socially oriented rationale for interactive and collaborative pair and group work (Lantolf 2000).

It is a fact that each of the three approaches to teaching that I have briefly touched upon – knowledge transmission, constructivism, and socioculturalism – all confer different roles on language teachers. This is also true of the more narrowly-focused language teaching methods, positioning teachers across the spectrum from drill conductor and model (e.g. the Audio-Lingual Method) to facilitator and counsellor (e.g. Community Language Learning) (Larsen-Freeman 2000). While some say today's times call for us to move beyond methods, adopting post-method macro-strategies in place of prescribed and proscribed methodological practices (Kumaravadivelu 1994), the fact is that most teachers practise an eclectic form of teaching.

Work on teacher cognition has played an increasingly important role in helping us understand how teachers think and therefore the work of teaching (see Borg, this volume). For instance, in the language teaching field, Woods (1996) has demonstrated the importance of

understanding the thinking process that underlies the decisions that teachers make moment by moment in conducting their lessons. Another widespread role ascribed to teachers and other professionals, ever since the publication of Schön's (1983) influential book, is that of 'reflective practitioner', someone who can detach oneself from experience, examine it, and learn from it (Richards and Lockhart 1994). This resonates with Allwright's (2003) 'exploratory practice'. Teachers are encouraged to experiment, to take risks, around some particular issue of interest in their teaching practice. They are then to step back and watch what happens. This set of procedures helps them to clarify issues around their own teaching practice and prevents it from going stale.

A recurring issue with which the field is sometimes called to contend is the widespread belief among non-professionals that if one can speak a language, one can teach it. This is known to be nonsense, although in truth little is known about the amount of training that is optimal or the way it should be distributed in teacher education programmes, i.e. the pre-versus in-service balance, with some arguing that a lengthy time spent on pre-service education before teacher-learners step into the classroom is not productive, and that at a minimum, learners of teaching should undergo a supervised teaching practicum (Bailey 2006).

Another issue that never seems to go away is the one regarding the speaker status of a teacher, i.e. native speaker or non-native speaker. While native speakers are preferred in many language education programmes, presumably for the model they provide and the access they have to intuitions about what is correct and how the language works, in actual fact, non-native speakers bring a great number of strengths to language teaching, not the least of which is that they are role models of successful learning themselves. Besides, if they speak the language of their students, they know the obstacles to acquisition and how to surmount them.

As I have visited each of the angles of the triangle, I have avoided suggesting that more recent developments have been superior to what preceded them. In fact, many of the educational developments, both old and new, are widely practised today. While it is true that one approach to language, teaching, and learning seeks to compensate for the perceived inadequacies of its predecessors, there is no perfect approach to language education, nor will there ever be (Prabhu 1990). Following from this premise and the recognition of learner differences, it is quite natural that language teachers would be eclectic. In fact, perhaps the most important role for a language teacher is that of mediator between the textbook/curriculum and the students, in order to address the multifarious and diverse needs of the present class.

Intersecting angles

This sequential treatment of the issues in the different angles suggests a more disjointed view of language education than is warranted. In truth, some of the most striking developments in the field have taken place at the intersection of the angles. Although I have already implicitly dealt with their connection in a few cases (e.g. the connection between a teacher and his or her conception of language; the connection between an interactionist perspective on SLA and task-based syllabi), I should also point out a few more overlaps between them to illustrate their interaction.

Language and learning

Answers to the question about language and about learning often come together in defining different language teaching methods. Another sector of the field at this intersection, which I have yet to introduce, is that of language assessment. From the ongoing assessment of

language learning that teachers perform in order to decide on their next teaching move, to the design and administration of high-stakes language proficiency tests to certify language skills and general proficiency, assessing the language that has been learned is a major force in language education. While standardized tests have typically made use of indirect measures of language proficiency, such as multiple-choice tests, more and more direct measures, such as oral proficiency interviews, are being employed these days (see O'Sullivan, this volume).

Reasoning that it would be important to facilitate comparisons of language proficiency among individuals and between different systems of qualifications, the Common European Framework of Reference was developed. Through it, individuals can self-report or be assessed at certain levels defined by what they can do in another language. It is also important to recognize that individuals do not have complete and separate competences of the languages they have knowledge of (Cook 2002). As a result, the Council of Europe (2001) has developed the European language portfolio, a document in which learners can record their individual language and cultural experiences.

Language and teaching

A recent example of the intersection between language and teaching is one in which language teaching materials are informed by linguistic corpora, large databases of spoken utterances and written materials/texts, which can be mined with computer search engines to reveal language patterns. The patterns reveal collocations or conventionalized sequences for particular lexical items. The way that we express meaning in language is not through stringing together individual words, but rather is in the form of phrasal units and lexicalized stems that become conventionalized over time with use (see Adolphs and Lin, this volume).

Learners and language

The learner's age is often the deciding factor as to what type of language is studied. Many younger learners these days are being taught language through content. In content and language integrated learning (CLIL) or content-based language teaching, the language is the vehicle through which other school subjects are learned. This approach has often been adopted with the needs of immigrant children in mind. It is thought that postponing children's education in other subjects while they learn the language of instruction might be detrimental to their overall education. However, these days it is being implemented in some countries, Spain and the Netherlands, for example, as a way to integrate English into the curriculum of all children.

The focus of instruction for older students is frequently different. Their reason for studying a language is often due to a particular goal, which results in their study of language for a specific occupational, technical, or academic purpose.

Context

One aspect of the figure that I have yet to discuss is the role of context, which can mean many things, not the least of which is the physical locale – where the language learning/education has taken place.

Much of the language learning in the world, although by no means all, takes place in classrooms, though this may be changing with the possibility of more autonomous learning, aided by technological advancements (see below). For example, in a new study conducted in

Austria, it was reported that 15 per cent of Austrians older than fifteen have learned one or more foreign languages outside of high school or university in the last ten years. However, in many parts of the world, classes are very large, and as much for classroom management as for promoting language acquisition, much of the work is done individually in a written form or in whole group choral responses. Although some SLA research has found that learning in and outside of the classroom is similar in certain respects (e.g. Felix 1981), others have found this not to be true in the case of the type of errors learners commit, for example (Pica 1983). Through language immersion programmes and study abroad opportunities, students can receive intensive experiences with language, which compensates for the slow progress and incomplete acquisition of many who study languages exclusively in the classroom.

Political pressures present in the context can also be influential. For instance, whereas bilingual education used to be a popular way to help students acquire another language while maintaining their heritage language and not falling behind in other subject matter, it has been considered a politically unpopular educational option in some circles and has been abolished in certain states of the USA. Then, too, whereas multilingualism is prevalent in many parts of the world and the plurilingualism of individuals promoted, increasing globalization has given rise to 'utilitarian' language teaching, and the dominance of a few languages, especially English as an international language of trade, commerce, technology, and science.

Also playing a contextual role are national language policies. One striking example of this is the termination of Russian language programmes in countries that formerly comprised the Soviet Union. For instance, Tajikistan has drafted a new law banning the use of Russian and other minority languages in advertisements, business papers, and government documents. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, students are being instructed in other modern languages, primarily English. Closely related to which languages are promoted in language policies is the matter of language ideology or the beliefs that people hold about language. For instance, Lippi-Green (1997) calls attention to the bias that exists towards an abstract, homogeneous standard language, which becomes what is taught despite the fact that there is a great deal of variation in actual language use outside the classroom.

Future trajectory

With the migration of the world's population on the rise, one of the current and likely to be future issues is how to support the complex needs of students being taught and expected to learn through a language that is not their native tongue (Bailey *et al.* 2008). General education teachers are increasingly expected to teach language to students from diverse backgrounds. At the same time, second language teachers are expected to support these students' learning across the curriculum. This demand is pushing the field of second language teaching to redefine its knowledge base and professional competencies.

A not unrelated issue confronting language educators these days is the fact that many of the world's languages are endangered. Whereas language policies in some countries have brought certain languages, such as Irish Gaelic, back from the brink, the rate at which other languages are dying out is worrisome. Concerted efforts to teach these languages must be made, or they will be lost forever.

Another related issue is which language to teach. As I have indicated earlier, English is the current favourite due to the global economy, but perhaps in the future it will be Chinese, as clearly Chinese is spoken by far more native speakers than English, although English currently surpasses all other languages in the number of people who speak it non-natively (Graddol 2006). Its dominance has led to concern for linguistic/cultural imperialism (Phillipson 1992)

(see Canagarajah and Ben Said, this volume). There are those, however, who point out that there need not be a hegemonic standard English, given that many varieties of world Englishes exist, moulded by the influences of (usually) post-colonial contexts in which they are spoken natively (see Kirkpatrick and Deterding, this volume). For other researchers, English has already become an international lingua franca and is therefore not owned by native speakers of English at all. As such, it may evolve a grammar and a sound system that is distinctive from native dialects, but which is somehow easier to acquire, while facilitating intercultural communication, often among non-native speakers of English with each other (Jenkins 2000; Seidlhofer 2001). Of course, questions of which language to teach and whose language it is do not involve English exclusively. Teachers of all languages wrestle with this issue. For example, Arabic instructors have to choose which dialect of spoken Arabic to teach, as the dialects vary substantially from one another and from the modern written standard.

A final issue that I will point to is the ambivalence to the study of other languages that exists in some circles. Perhaps, not surprisingly, the ambivalence is often most manifest in English-speaking countries. Also, not surprisingly, interest in other languages picks up during times of national crisis, when the government laments not having speakers of particular languages, deemed 'strategic'. Under those circumstances, there is a big infusion of government funding to encourage the teaching of certain languages, such as under the recent National Strategic Languages Initiative in the United States. At other times, when the perceived crisis is over, the level of funding is not sustained and the study of other languages languishes. Perhaps an exception to this trend is the US government's continuing sponsorship of Language Resource Centers, sited at universities throughout the country. All these centres have Websites, many of which offer language teaching materials and other resources, especially helpful in the case of the less commonly taught languages.

Another example of the ambivalence towards the study of other languages is what is currently taking place in the UK. It is now compulsory for children in primary schools in England to be taught a foreign language (this will be the case from 2010), but at the same time it is no longer mandatory for pupils to study a language beyond the age of fourteen. This move has led to plummeting numbers of students taking a modern language at GCSE. It seems the government is sending a mixed message.

Technology

There are three major ways that technology and language learning/education have interfaced in modern times. They are computer-mediated contact with other languages/cultures, the use of corpora to inform language teaching materials (and methods), and Internet-delivered language instruction. I will touch upon each of these in turn (see Kern, this volume).

Computer-mediated contact has meant that learners can engage with other learners of the same language or even with native speakers of the language they are studying. This might take the form of students' interacting in chat rooms or outside of class in online discussions with classmates. It has been found that such contact encourages the production of more language on the part of students, especially ones who might be more reticent to participate in face-to-face discussion in class. Of course, often the exchanges take the form of writing, not speech, although with increased bandwidth and such programmes as Skype, spoken interaction is possible. The opportunity for students to make contact with others in chat rooms and social networking sites has a positive influence on student motivation. Students who do not see the point of learning a foreign language find interacting with someone who speaks the other language very motivating. It should be pointed out, though, that conventional wisdom has it that

the best approach is a blended one, involving both face-to-face and distance/computer-mediated interaction.

Every day one learns about a new corpus being developed. Each corpus acts as a database for some language written, or when transcribed, oral data, to, as I mentioned earlier, inform language teaching materials. Access to corpora comprising millions of words of text, makes it easy to discern usage patterns, which traditional grammars and descriptions of language have missed. For example, 'bordered on' can have a geographic reference, but it is used more often in reporting an undesirable situation, e.g. 'bordering on arrogance' (Schmitt 2009). In addition, students themselves are being taught to search corpora when they have their own question about collocates and connotations and context.

I think it is fair to say that the Internet has not yet delivered on its promise to make language education accessible to millions who would otherwise be denied it, especially in chronically understaffed language teaching situations. For example, the demand for English in China and the increasing popularity of the study of Chinese elsewhere has led to a national shortage of English teachers in China and a worldwide shortage of Chinese language teachers. However, technology may provide at least a short-term solution. One of the items making the headlines recently was an announcement from National Taiwan University that it will develop a worldwide online Mandarin Chinese teaching project.

Another advantage of Web-based instruction is that it provides access to languages that might not be offered locally. For instance, earlier this year, the University of California–Los Angeles (UCLA), went live with its Web-based instructional programmes in Azeri and the Iraqi dialect of Arabic. This development allows UCLA to send language instruction to other campuses of the University of California system, and in turn to receive instructional programmes in Danish, Filipino, Khmer, and Zulu from the University of California, Berkeley, which may present a partial solution to the problem of keeping robust the less commonly taught, even endangered, languages.

Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have highlighted some of the issues in language learning and education, without making the chapter one lengthy list (although it may still seem so to readers). In place of a list, I have offered readers what I have found to be a useful heuristic for organizing developments in the field, namely a set of questions. As I have considered a few answers to each, I have looked briefly at different definitions of language, theories of learning, individual learner factors, approaches to language teaching, and roles of language teachers. In some cases, I have discussed the pedagogical implications that have been informed by the answers to the questions. The truth is that the questions, which have yielded different answers in different places at different times, have implications for language education, though no question-and-answer or combination of questions and answers will produce a satisfactory solution for all times and places, due to local social, political, and economic factors, the uniqueness of individual language learners and instructional contexts, ever-new research findings, and the theoretical commitments educators make.

Although the areas of language learning and language education intersect, there remain some uneasy fits as well, such as the perennial one between structural and functional approaches. There is also some ebb and flow among the general populace, at least in some countries of the world, in the interest accorded modern language study. With the economic climate that globalization has engendered, often it is the international languages that do attract students, the result being that languages that are spoken by fewer speakers are becoming increasingly

endangered. Although technology is not likely to resolve every issue, it does promise increased accessibility to language instruction for those who have the technological wherewithal, the access, and the computer literacy to take advantage of such instruction. It also may provide the means to keep some of the less commonly taught languages vital.

Related topics

Due to the broad coverage in this chapter, many of the other chapters in this volume are related. I have drawn attention to some of these already. Perhaps, though, the chapters that most complement this one are Scott Thornbury's chapter on methodology and Lourdes Ortega's chapter on second language acquisition.

Further reading

Larsen-Freeman, D. and Anderson, M. (2011) *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*, 3rd edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press. (This third edition explores a number of language teaching methods and methodological innovations by offering readers analyses of classroom lessons in terms of their philosophical underpinnings and the activities that are practised.)
Long, M. and Doughty, C. (eds) (2009) *The Handbook of Language Teaching*, Malden, MA: Blackwell. (The chapters in this handbook span a number of topics in the field, with each covering research findings on core issues.)
Spolsky, B. and Hult, F. (eds) (2008) *The Handbook of Educational Linguistics*, Malden, MA: Blackwell. (This volume contains forty-four chapters, featuring reviews of many areas of educational linguistics, including a section on research-practice relationships.)

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