

REPORTED MISSING – LEARNERS IN SLA/EFL RESEARCH

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1. INTRODUCTION

A very brief overview on research on classroom language learning seems to support Gitlin's statement that

Educational research is still a process that for the most part silences those studied, ignores their personal knowledge, and strengthens the assumption that researchers are *the* producers of knowledge. (1990: 444)

Research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) in general and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in particular has moved in recent years from 'an almost exclusive concern with the teacher and teaching procedures to issues related to the learner and learning processes' (Kübler, 1991: 1). However, the ultimate focus of many of the early studies on learners was still the optimisation of teaching and the development of teaching techniques (Allwright, 1988), rather than an attempt to describe and understand better learners' contributions to the classroom.

2. LEARNER STRATEGIES

The *prescriptive* nature of early research appears to have lingered on, even when the focus shifted to a more learner-oriented approach. Research on *learner strategies* is a case in point. Although, to be fair, most studies fall short of defining what a good language learner is, the underlying assumption seems to be that some language learning strategies are more effective than others, and that, by uncovering and identifying the strategies most commonly used by successful learners, a prescriptive list of effective strategies can be arrived at, whose use will lead to more successful learning (see, *inter alia*, Ellis, 1989; Naiman *et al*; 1978, O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Stevick, 1989; Wenden, 1987, 1991). This assumption requires a considerable leap of faith. Indeed, Skehan suggests that the opposite argument could equally be put forward, namely that

the use of learner strategies may be the *result* of proficiency, rather than the cause. That is,

The use of learner strategies [...] may not lead to higher accomplishments – instead one of the benefits of higher proficiency may be the capacity to use a wider range of strategies. (1989: 97)

Secondly, these studies seem to endorse the possibility that these ‘effective’ strategies can be successfully translated into learner training programmes (Dickinson, 1987; Holec, 1988), which in turn presupposes that it is possible to determine what and how a learner learns by controlling learner behaviour, another highly disputed assumption (see Allwright, 1997, and 2001; Breen 1987).

The third implication of these studies is that specific learning strategies can be taught through specific teaching techniques (Chamot, 1999), which presumes a direct relationship between what is taught and what is learned. This assertion, so often taken for granted by researchers and teachers, has been contested by, among others, Allwright, 1986a and 2000a; Handscombe, 1966; Nunan, 1995; Prabhu, 1995; Slimani, 1987 and 1992; Wittrock, 1986.

To sum up, a great number of learner-oriented studies in ESL/EFL seems to favour a mentalist, cognitive orientation that aims at uncovering general characteristics of language learning that are then translated into recommendations for teaching and learning practice. Kübler (1991: 4) summarises the general aim of this line of research as ‘to describe what is typical and unique in the process of human language development’. Taking on board Ellis’s dichotomy (1988) between a *linguistic* versus an *educational* approach, she anchors it within the former, and points out the potential problems of translating ‘descriptive scientific statements’ of linguistic phenomena into ‘prescriptive recommendations for teachers and learners’ (Kübler, 1991: 6). This issue is addressed perhaps nowhere as critically as by Hatch:

Perhaps we are no worse than any other, but I think our field must soon be known for the incredible leaps in logic we make in applying our research findings to classroom teaching. (1978: 124)

3. LEARNER DIARIES

Another trend in second/foreign language research has concentrated more on trying to describe and understand the contributions that individual learners bring to the second/foreign language classroom. As early as 1972, Allwright was arguing that it was essential to include ‘what really happens between teacher and class’ (158), which included looking into the learners and their contribution, a notion thus reinforced in a later article:

Learners are interesting, at least as interesting as teachers, because they are the people who do whatever learning gets done, whether it is because of or in spite of the teacher. (1980: 165)

The use of diary studies and introspective, first-person accounts of language learners as research tools has also contributed to bringing the learner to centre stage. Although most of the early studies were in fact produced by atypical language learners, in that the authors were themselves experienced language teachers and/or researchers reflecting on their own experiences as learners of a foreign language (see Schumann & Schumann 1977; Bailey, 1983; Schmidt & Frota, 1986), nonetheless their accounts provided valuable insights into the process of learning a foreign language. These personal, subjective accounts also shed light on the affective factors underlying the learning process, namely issues related to anxiety and competitiveness, preferred ways of learning, and attitudes and beliefs towards teaching methods and materials. The use of personal, highly idiosyncratic accounts as data did not just broaden our perception of the multiplicity of factors involved in the process of learning a foreign language – they also helped establish a new research paradigm in second/foreign language research. As Allwright and Bailey point out, this kind of study does not allow for statistical generalisations – rather, ‘an appeal has to be made instead to more human judgement’ (1991: 183). Indeed, personal accounts can be as insightful as the more traditional, experimental, quantitative approach favoured by many studies within the field.

More crucially to the matter at hand, diary studies have managed to give a voice to language learners, even if very sophisticated ones. Candlin reminds us that

...if one had to identify one of the most telling factors in the relatively short-lived, if intense, history in second language acquisition, it would have to be the consistent anonymising, if not the actual eclipsing, of the learner. (Candlin, general editor’s preface in Norton, 2000: xiii)

4. CLASSROOM LANGUAGE LEARNING RESEARCH

Classroom language learning research has also played an important role in bringing the learner to the fore. Although the starting point of this line of research has been, according to Allwright (1988), a preoccupation with assessing the merits of different teaching methods, the more recent views of the classroom as a social event (Allwright, 1989a and 1989b; Breen, 1985; and Prabhu, 1992) that is co-produced by both teacher and learners has led to an increasing view of the learner as an active participant in the classroom, and therefore worth investigating.

Among these, one can refer to studies on learner personal orientations in the foreign language classroom (Allwright, 1996; Breen, 1987), learner perceptions of classroom activities (Block, 1995), learners' uptake (Slimani, 1987), learner views on textbooks (Cherchalli, 1988), learner perceptions of language and learning (Kübler, 1991; Tarone & Yule, 1989), learner observation of classrooms (Eken, 1999) and issues of learner identity and personal investment (Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton 2000). Although both the focus and the research orientation of these studies are very different, nonetheless they share an interest in the characteristics and perceptions of individual learners, and do not purport to achieve global solutions to the learning process of a second/foreign language. As Block puts it,

It is my view that if we adopt a view of the classroom as a social context, our point of departure is not the quest for a theory of SLA for all of humanity but a modest attempt to understand language teaching in situ. (Block, 1995: 24)

5. THE DIFFICULTIES OF STUDYING LEARNERS

It would seem reasonable to conclude from the above that the need to include the individual learner in the research agenda is well established within the field of second/foreign language acquisition. Indeed, Ellis states that

The study of learners' opinions about language learning constitutes an important area of enquiry, as it is reasonable to assume that their 'philosophy' dictates their approach to learning and choice of learning strategies. (Ellis, 1994: 479)

However, as Block points out (1995: 42), the literature on learner perceptions is still relatively scarce, at least when compared to the amount of studies devoted to teachers. Perhaps it is worthwhile speculating why this is so.

At first sight, the practical difficulties of researching the learners may suffice for explaining the relative lack of studies. Among these, one could mention several inter-related factors, such as the difficulty of having *access* to students who may be willing to act as informants; the issue of *articulateness*, especially in those cases where the researcher does not share the same first language as the students (which, incidentally, seems to be the case in a lot of SLA studies, where the interviews, questionnaires, etc. are usually carried out in English), and the question of *time*, or the lack of it, for developing a trusted working relationship between researcher and researched.

On second thoughts, however, I would like to suggest that some other issues may be at play here. To begin with, the search for a unique paradigm that may lead the field to a state of ‘normal science’ (Kuhn, 1970) has favoured a positivist research paradigm that focuses on the cognitive mechanisms of language learning and stresses causal relationships and generalization of the findings. This in turn has been detrimental towards a more speculative, explorative stance (Block, 1996) that takes on board ‘social psychological factors such as affect, the learning environment (the effect of school, program and class on individual students) and individuals’ beliefs about language teaching and learning’ (Block, 1995: 27). Also, Pennycook argues that there seems to be a confusion between ‘scientific and educational theories’, which he views as ‘an extension of positivism to educational theory’ (1994: 21).

The traditional view of academic research as a process that ideally provides solutions to the practical problems of teaching and learning a foreign language may also be an issue. In keeping with this assertion, it could be argued that research that reinforces the extreme heterogeneity of learning styles, attitudes and beliefs, not to mention of what actually gets learned in each lesson by each student (see Slimani, 1987), and therefore fails to provide answers as to the ‘right’ method or the ‘right’ approach, may be considered to be too discouraging or downright irrelevant by language policy planners, researchers, teachers, teacher trainees, teacher trainers, and even publishers. Therefore, research that does not aim directly at enhancing teaching and learning effectiveness for the greatest number may be discouraged by those who have a say in the field, from governmental agencies and research funding boards to research committees.

Another issue concerns the traditional view of the relationship between teaching and learning. As an EFL teacher, I confess that there is something comforting about the notion that my learners will learn, at least to some extent, what I have taught, and that their learning styles will be sufficiently homogeneous to accommodate the planned learning activities. Allwright (1984, 1986b, 2000a) would probably argue here that there is often a confusion between the *creation and management of opportunities for learning*, the visible and potentially manageable part of what goes on in classrooms, and *learning* itself, which is neither. Or, in other words, the issue may lie in a certain confusion between the *public* nature of classroom, governed by socially accepted norms of behaviour, and the ultimately *private* nature of the learning process, individual and therefore ‘essentially idiosyncratic’ (Allwright, 2000a: 7) and less easily controllable by external factors, such as the teacher, the textbook, or the teaching method.

If we acknowledge the dichotomy between the management of learning and learning itself, the practical consequences for language teaching are far-reaching, as it

...calls into question the value of what seems almost universally to be taken for granted, the proposition that it makes sense to try to teach people particular things at particular times. (2000: 8-9).

It has also been argued that this proposition, with the concomitant one that research on more effective routes and rates of what is taught (rather than who is being taught) will naturally lead to more effective learning, continue to be widely propagated within the field of Applied Linguistics because it makes commercial sense for theorists and providers of professional expertise, namely academics, researchers, teacher educators, textbook writers, and publishers (Littlejohn, 1992; Pennycook, 1994). It is interesting to note here that approaches that try to cater for local needs and shift the planning and decision-making processes about how and what is to be taught in the classroom from researchers, language policy planners, curriculum developers, and textbook writers to individual teachers and their learners and so are not in principle easily translated into published materials – have not achieved any visible success, namely Prabhu’s communicational approach (1987) and Breen’s process syllabus (1984).

This somewhat disenchanting view of the world of SLA in general and EFL in particular is endorsed by several studies. Among these, one could mention Littlejohn's work on mainstream general EFL textbooks (1992), generously quoted throughout this study, in which the published materials analysed were found to espouse very prescriptive views of language teaching and learning that reinforce the de-skilling of the teachers and learners targeted:

... the dependency relationship fostered by reproduction task-types which script teacher-learner interaction may serve the long-term interests of publishers by reproducing and cultivating the consumption of commercially produced materials. (1992: 233)

The commercial feasibility of textbooks in a worldwide market is said to be assured also through the watering down of any issues that may be too sensitive politically and/or culturally¹¹. More importantly to the matter at hand is the subsumed conclusion that individual differences between learners are, to borrow Candlin's metaphor, 'eclipsed' in the process so that the textbooks appear to be suitable to the majority of the EFL student population:

... the learners' previous knowledge and experience, such as their knowledge of their first language, experience of other learning and aspects of their personal life, are called upon very little by the materials. (1992: 268)

The stress is thus laid on an idealised view of the EFL learner, whose role in the classroom is construed as a 'reproducer, decoder, and ultimately, accumulator of what is already there', rather than as a 'potential creator and interpreter of language' (1992: 296).

There seem to be other factors that contribute to the relative absence of teachers and learners from mainstream research, other than those determined by strictly economic reasons. Allwright (2000b) suggests that the need for higher academic qualifications in an increasingly competitive profession has led to the proliferation of MA courses in Applied Linguistics, which in turn has resulted in an over-intellectualisation of issues and a reification of theoretical thinking at the expense of the study of actual teaching practice. Pennycook, on the other hand, positions the 'construction of the Method concept in language teaching' and all its theoretical baggage and 'expert' knowledge within the wider social, political, and economic spheres, and argues that the concept of method,

‘rather than analysing what is happening in language classrooms, [...] is a prescription for classroom behaviour’ (1989: 609).

As far as academic research is concerned, Block (1995: 8-9) refers to the overwhelming percentage of articles originating from universities based in Anglo-Saxon countries in four major applied linguistics journals. The editing boards and reviewers of these journals are said to function as ‘gatekeepers’ of the views and theories predominant in the field and exclude less ‘orthodox’ voices, namely those that espouse ‘the belief that language lessons are essentially social events, which are co-constructed by the individuals participating in them’ (1995: 23). Although Block does not address here the important issue of agency, i.e. who is researching whom, I would argue that the question of restricted access to the most important international journals is very relevant to the present discussion, insofar as it seems to favour a more psycholinguistic perspective of language learning, ‘isolated from its social, cultural and educational contexts’ (Pennycook, 1994:299). This notion is echoed in van Lier, who argues for the field of SLA to be anchored more firmly in education:

SLA is about language learning. All around the world, billions of people are learning language, millions are teaching language, and they do so with effort, intelligence and ingenuity. These activities are the true data of SLA, they are the air that both constrains the dove of SLA, and keeps it aloft. In short, SLA and language pedagogy are inter-dependent pursuits. (van Lier, 1994: 341)

6. SUMMARY

I referred above to the relative dearth of research that concentrates on individual learners within the field of SLA in general and EFL in particular. I suggested that this situation may be caused by the predominant research paradigm in the field that favours a positivist view of foreign language learning, and whose search for generalisable findings are generally viewed as politically and economically advantageous. In the brief review of learner-centred research in applied linguistics above, I referred to what I perceive to be a flaw in a number of studies, namely that learners are often portrayed as a homogeneous mass and individual differences tend to be glossed over. Or, in the cases where those differences are taken into account, the prevailing perspective is to dismiss them in favour of those features that are perceived to be shared by the majority.

¹ It should be noted that Littlejohn does not consider the apparently innocuous content of the EFL textbooks analysed, which consists mostly of ‘fiction and non-message bearing linguistic items’ (1992: 268), to be any less ideologically laden than more partisan materials. To Pennycook, a view of ‘educational goods’ as ‘value-free’ is behind the fallacy that they are appropriate for all contexts, which he vigorously opposes (1994: 162-163).

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