Interview with Dr. Jenefer Philp

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Thank you to Dr. Jenefer Philp, Senior Lecturer of Applied Language Studies and Linguistics, The University of Auckland, for granting this interview. Dr. Philp’s research focuses on second language acquisition and individual differences, interaction, and oral corrective feedback, as well as on child second language acquisition. She came to Michigan State University to present at the Second Language Research Forum (SLRF) 2009, which was held October 29th through November 1st. For more information about Dr. Philp, please see her faculty page: http://artsfaculty.auckland.ac.nz/staff/?UPI=jphi048. This interview was arranged by Sheila Wheeler and conducted on October 31st.

Sheila: Can you tell me about how you first got involved in Second Language Studies?

Dr. Philp: Well I used to teach French in high school, retrained for ESL and then worked in Indonesia for three years as an ESL teacher. I became involved in a teacher training project, a World Bank project there. And while I was teaching there I really felt that I couldn’t teach well if I didn’t know how people learned languages, and so after three years in Indonesia I went back to do my master’s to find out how people learn languages. So I did my M.Phil in applied linguistics at the University of Sydney - I was really lucky that Cathy Doughty was there, and I was able to do my dissertation with Cathy on peer interaction in the foreign language classroom. The University of Sydney hosted the first Pac-SLRF (Pacific SLRF). It was great to hear the plenary speakers talk about interaction and SLA. I can really remember being there and people talking and they said “What do you think Mike?” and “What do you think Teri?” - all these people whose articles I’d read were in the room, and Sue Gass was there. You know it was so exciting to actually meet them and talk with them. I got really interested in it. Although it was always my plan go back to Indonesia or somewhere else and continue teaching, I ended up working in a center for research on Second Language Acquisition (LARC), under Manfred Pienemann. Alison Mackey was working there too. So, you know, I was kind of involved in this world of SLA research and I found it really interesting. But originally it came from a desire to be able to teach languages better.

Sheila: Have you done any teaching since you went to school to get your master’s?

Dr. Philp: Oh yeah, because when I was doing my master’s I worked part time teaching English and also with the PhD I did ESL teaching at the same time. I’m now at the University of Auckland in New Zealand, as well as lecturing in SLA and other areas I’ve taught English for Academic Purposes as part of the program offered by our department.

Sheila: What kind of advice do you have for current students, either MA TESOL or SLS
PhD students, but specifically students who want to go on to teach?

Dr. Philp: I think being at university and doing a master’s or PhD is really an opportunity to think about teaching, and think about what’s behind how people learn languages … to think about how does that relate to teaching, and ways of teaching. I teach a course on individual differences and a lot of the people that I teach are teachers, or people wanting to be teachers, they often remark it’s really good to think about the learners and where they’re coming from and what’s helpful for them, and how they’re all different. You know I think it’s a time that you can actually reflect on the whole learning process, because when you’re teaching you’re so busy teaching you don’t really have time to read up and to think about it. So make the most of the time that you’ve got to do that and once you begin teaching, think about ways to keep those links and to keep reading, coming to conferences, talking to people, or have research done in your classroom, or do action research yourself, publish in journals – these are all good ways of linking research and teaching. I think if you’re a reflective teacher that’s very helpful. You’re thinking about your teaching all the time and how you can improve, and keeping up on new developments. If you haven’t taught before I think it’s really good if you can get opportunities for voluntary or paid work teaching and observing classrooms, because that helps you understand better the whole process. I think if you just go straight through your degrees without teaching, you know, you can read it all but it doesn’t mean as much until you relate it to actual teaching. It’s good to complement studying with observing or teaching, just like when you’re teaching it’s good to keep reading.

Sheila: What about the PhD students?

Dr. Philp: It depends on what area you want to work in. Some people go into research or go into areas like the government departments, for example government departments in education would maybe employ people to advise teachers or to be involved in testing, reporting, working out policies or materials development. So I think if you’re interested in that area, it’s good to have teaching experience. Sometimes even going away for a year, going abroad for a year, you know volunteering can open possibilities. I’m not really familiar with the American situation, in New Zealand where people with higher degrees find work is in schools, in government or private enterprises that adjunct to educational institutions, - in materials development, teacher training, teacher development, language testing - it just depends what your expertise is, your research and experience, as to where you want to go with it.

Sheila: Can you tell me a little bit about what you’re working on currently?

Dr. Philp: I have two areas of interest at the moment, and one has to do with child language acquisition. My broad area’s on interaction in SLA. So one area is on child second language acquisition, and differences between age groups. In some of my research I investigate how 5 to 7 year olds are different from 11 to 12 year olds are different from adolescents: how interaction is different for those different ages; how learning processes might be different for those different ages; how that could affect the way we teach. So part of the research is related to understanding SLA and part of the research is related to teaching/instructed SLA. So that’s one area and another area that I’m interested in at the moment is peer interaction in second language classrooms, because I think in classrooms learners spend a lot of time talking to other learners, rather
than with the teacher. That’s an area that’s very messy to research, that I’m just starting to learn more about.

Sheila: Do you sense that there may be a risk with two non-native speakers, that they may incorporate each other’s non-nativelike utterances?

Dr. Philp: Yeah, sure. I think it depends a lot on the context. In a second language context, like here, I don’t think it’s such a big drama, because they’ve got all the input around them. I think it’s more difficult in a foreign language context, where input is limited, and when they’re really dependent on one another. But I think probably learner-learner interaction has different kinds of goals and different benefits from whole-class teacher-led interaction, - it’s interesting to think about what’s the contribution of each to instructed language learning.

Sheila: How long have you been in the field?

Dr. Philp: I finished my PhD in 1998.

Sheila: In those 11 years have you noticed changes in the field or trends?

Dr. Philp: I think I was really lucky, the time that I started, because it was just at a time when people were starting to think about the processes behind language learning and looking at attention and working memory and all those kinds of things. I think over those ten years there’s been a big push towards looking at processes of learning, and more recently thinking outside of just cognitive processes, looking at the social aspects of learning as well and trying to bring together many different pieces of the puzzle.