Interview with Andrea Révész

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Andrea Révész is a senior lecturer in applied linguistics and TESOL at Institute of Education, University College London. Her research interests lie in the areas of second language acquisition (SLA) and second language instruction. In particular, she has conducted research on the roles of tasks, implicit/explicit learning and teaching, and individual differences in instructed second language development.

Professor Revesz kindly agreed to this interview as she was presenting at SLS Symposium, MSU, in February 2017.

Could you tell us about how you first got involved in second language research and what motivated you to become interested in second language acquisition (SLA) and applied linguistics?
A: When I did my undergraduate degree, my interests lay in the area of theoretical linguistics, and later I went on to do an MA in theoretical linguistics. At the same time, I also did an MA in English Language and Literature, which had a mandatory teaching component. When I did my practice teaching, I realized that I very much enjoyed teaching. So, after finishing university, I decided to take up a language teaching position in a secondary school in Budapest. I wasn’t thinking about pursuing a PhD at the time. After three years of teaching, however, I felt that I wanted to study further. By then I was more interested in teaching-related issues, so I decided to apply to a PhD program in applied rather than theoretical linguistics. Then, as part of my PhD at Teachers College, I took a course on SLA, and got hooked!

After you got into the PhD program, did you become more interested in second language acquisition?
A: I think I had always been interested in SLA even as a secondary school student. I just wasn't aware that the area I was interested in was called SLA. I didn’t know that the field existed.

Could you briefly describe the projects you are currently working on?
A: One of my current areas of interest is investigating cognitive processes involved in second language writing. I got drawn to this area through my interest in triangulating different
methodologies. Examining writing processes provides a platform for combining methods such as keystroke logging, eye-tracking, stimulated recall, and measurement of cognitive individual differences. I find it fascinating how the triangulation of these various data sources can inform research on second language writing.

I'm also interested, of course, in second language developmental processes. My current research on developmental issues is conducted mainly in collaboration with my PhD students. With Jookyoung Jung, we are looking into the effects of task complexity on noticing in the context of reading. With Minjin Lee, we are investigating the impact of enhanced captions on the learning of second language grammar from a TBLT perspective. I additionally work on a project examining the effects of task repetition on second language writing development with my former PhD student, John Rogers.

I'm currently also involved in an EU-funded project based at UCL. We are developing an online infrastructure called iRead that will help first, dyslexic, and second language children to improve their reading skills. I'm working on the L2 component. This is a really large-scale project, involving 9 countries and several commercial partners. This is a very new experience for me. I've never been part of such a big project before, working with colleagues from variety of fields such as learning technology, computer science, gaming, learning disabilities, and computational linguistics.

It sounds very fascinating. Your PhD studies were related to corrective feedback, which is in line with task-based language teaching (TBLT). That's what I understand.

A: Yes, the common thread in my research is an interest in tasks and TBLT. I tend to conceptualize my research through a TBLT lens. My current work on writing, listening and reading is also all task-related.

What motivated your particular interest in task-based language teaching? This question was partly answered, though.

A: When I did my first research methods course at TC, we were asked to critique a paper written by Peter Skehan and Pauline Foster, and I found the paper fascinating. This prompted me to read more on this topic. I immediately felt that this was a line of research, which has direct implications for language teaching. I could also relate my previous language teaching experience to the TBLT literature. As a language teacher, I used a task-supported approach, and really enjoyed using tasks. At the time, I was not aware that many activities I used were tasks. I didn't follow a purely task-based syllabus, but I think a large part of my teaching was task-based.

Many studies on TBLT have been conducted to provide pedagogical implications for second language (L2) teaching and learning. What do you think about the effectiveness of such attempts to fill the gap between theory and practice?

A: TBLT is becoming more and more popular in a variety of contexts. It is very difficult and time-consuming, however, to design a pure task-based syllabus as described in Michael Long's
work. A task-supported approach is more feasible to implement in most contexts, especially when local curricula do not explicitly support TBLT.

If a task-supported approach can be eclectic, can it also be more doable?
A: Yes, I think a task-supported approach is easier to adopt for teachers who have previously used more traditional approaches. Also, learners who are not new to language learning and have followed a structural syllabus in the past, often seem to prefer such an approach.

As a professor and supervisor, what advice can you give the PhD students to be good researchers in this field?
A: I believe it is really important that you choose an area of research that you are really interested in and passionate about. It's also very important to present at conferences and try to publish your work while you are doing your PhD. When I was applying for jobs, publications were already important, but the academic job market is much more competitive now. You all seem to be doing all of these things at MSU, this is such a great and inspiring place for PhD students. Reflecting on my own PhD studies, I also found very helpful and stimulating to meet other PhD students, work together, and support each other. As a PhD student, you might not have the chance to collaborate on research as you are so busy with your own project. After I had finished my PhD, however, much of my research involved collaborating with researchers I met as a PhD student. I still often consult these colleagues/friends for advice and feedback.

You mean collaboration with others is important.
A: Yes, both with peers and professors. You learn a lot through the process.

Before we end this interesting interview, is there anything you would like to add?
A: I would just like to thank you for inviting me to MSU. MSU is one of the most well known places to do second language acquisition research. It's a very stimulating context. It is wonderful to be here.