Interview with Dr. Robert DeKeyser

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I would like to thank Robert DeKeyser, Professor of Second Language Acquisition, University of Maryland, for agreeing to be interviewed for these working papers. Dr. DeKeyser’s research interests include SLA, interlanguage variability, individual differences in SLA, aptitude-treatment interaction, cognitive psychology of language acquisition, and age effects in SLA. He came to Michigan State University to give a plenary talk at the Second Language Research Forum 2009. The interview was conducted by Jimin Kahng on November 1, 2009. For more information about Dr. DeKeyser, please visit his faculty page: http://www.languages.umd.edu/SLAA/rdk.html.

Jimin: How did you come to be interested in second language acquisition?

Dr. DeKeyser: Well, living in Belgium, I guess, it’s easy to do that because we had French as a second language in grade school, and at least in our high school track we all had six languages; two classical, Latin and Ancient Greek, two languages spoken in the country, French and Dutch, and English and a bit of German. So if you’re learning languages all the time, you’re interested in the process, of course. In a country where so many languages are taught, you see a lot of people studying language and literature at the university and a lot of language teachers and that was my plan, too. Then I decided I wanted to learn to do research alongside teaching and that’s how this all started. (laugh)

Jimin: Moving on to some of your research, let’s talk about implicit and explicit learning. Could you explain the relationship between the two types of learning and the role of practice?

Dr. DeKeyser: There are slightly different definitions depending on who you read, but I think my definition would be something like this: implicit learning is learning without awareness of what you’re learning and explicit learning is learning with awareness of what you are learning.

If you believe in an important role for implicit learning, then practice basically means communication and from lots of communication, proficiency should result. If you think explicit learning is very important, then practice means any way of using the initial explicit knowledge you learned, using that to generate more procedurialized, automatized, and maybe eventually implicit knowledge. Whether knowledge eventually becomes implicit or not, I think few people really care about that from a practical point of view. The important thing is that you can automatize. Of course, the classical problem is that at the beginning you learn the rules and you may know them perfectly and be able to use them on a fill-in-the-blanks test, but using them for speaking is different, so the role of practice is gradually transforming that knowledge, using one kind of
knowledge to create another kind, which is probably the better metaphor, so that eventually you can speak fluently on the basis of what originally you were taught in the form of explicit rules.

Jimin: There are researchers who argue that there’s no interface between implicit and explicit knowledge. I was reading a part of this book (showing the book A Neurolinguistic Theory of Bilingualism by Paradis) and...

Dr. DeKeyser: Oh, Michel Paradis, yes. He has a newer book by the way, by the same publisher, which is called Declarative and Procedural Determinants of Second Languages—I certainly read the chapter on age and agree completely with what he said about age. I haven’t read the whole book yet but I do know that for a long time his point of view has been that you cannot turn one kind of knowledge into another. I agree with this point of view; one type of knowledge is CAUSAL in the development of the other.

I remember very well a couple of years ago, there was a symposium at Georgetown University, which is almost our neighbor, and Paradis and Ullman very strongly argued that you cannot turn explicit knowledge into implicit or, to use Ullman’s term, “declarative” into procedural because anatomically and physiologically there is no neurological path for this process. But my point is that the role is causal and indirect in the sense that you can engage in certain tasks because of your explicit knowledge and then engaging in these tasks gradually builds up implicit knowledge. So it’s not like this all happens inside the brain going from one place to another. No. It’s really the tasks that explicit knowledge allows you to engage in, which then allows you to learn implicit knowledge from.

This is very ironic because, I’m sure this is something you won’t know, nobody knows this, if there is one person that I should credit for getting me interested in psycholinguistics, then it is Michel Paradis. Thirty years ago, when I was an undergraduate in Belgium, Michel Paradis on a rainy December afternoon gave a talk to the undergraduates about psycholinguistics and neurolinguistics. I also met with him briefly during or after graduate school in his office in Montreal, and of course, he’s done a lot of very interesting research. So it’s sort of ironic that after, in a way, being inspired by him to get into this profession, I end up disagreeing on a fairly important point. However, our disagreements are not that complete because, as I said, I really think it’s due to misleading phraseology that people seem to disagree so much. “Turning into” is not the right word. It’s “causal effect of one leading to the other”. There are people that would deny that causal effect anyway. But I would put it as follows “what do we have most evidence for?” People learning knowledge explicitly and then using that to develop fluency, or people learning implicitly from scratch? What do we have most evidence for? Well, I would say, for the former case, we have evidence from millions of people; for the other case, we have evidence from zero people. (laugh)

Jimin: Could you briefly introduce your current projects?

Dr. DeKeyser: I have several things that I need to write up but what I’m most interested in at this point is designing a new study on age effects because it’s a very controversial topic, very poorly understood and I would like to do something rather radically new methodologically speaking, not only on a larger scale because all the studies suffer from very small sample sizes but also with better selected people who can be argued to have had very good input,
people who have had minimal contact with their native language. Of course the combination of a large sample with people who have hardly any contact with their native language which is very hard find because if you're in a place with a lot of nonnative speakers that have the same native language, then they speak each other’s language. And if you find a place where there is somebody who’s isolated, then that’s a good example of a good context for acquisition but then we have only one person and, of course, you need a lot more. So I’m trying to think of ways of finding a compromise between these two problems.

Jimin: How can Second Language Studies serve the community at large? What do you think is the role of SLS?

Dr. DeKeyser: We are more applied than most areas of linguistics. A lot of what we do can and should have practical implications for how people teach, for how people put curricula together and even for broader questions like at what age should you start teaching or how should you adapt teaching to age and so on.

The role here for research actually specifically could be geared a little bit more towards the underserved populations right now because we tend to always think of people taking foreign languages in high school and college, or people who are in an English language institute as graduate students but there are many immigrants in a lot of countries. That population tends to be underserved because they are not required to take language classes and, there is often not much funding for language classes. We don’t exactly know how to deal with these very diverse populations and so on. So I think an important role for research is to look at populations with little education and who, of course, need English just like anybody else and to see how teaching methods can be adopted, because even though I’m a great believer in explicit learning and explicit knowledge, I realize, of course, that you cannot teach lots of grammar rules to people with very limited time and very limited educational background, and that’s sometimes you’ll need a shortcut in the sense of teaching more lexical knowledge, more collocations, more pragmatics, and so on. You cannot do everything in a short period of time. Sometimes you have to do something radically different. There’s a difference between ideal and what is the best you can do in many circumstances.

Jimin: What do you think are challenges the field of SLS is facing?

Dr. DeKeyser: I don’t know where to start on this point because there are so many. One challenge is the misinterpretation of our research: for instance, even though myself, I strongly believe in age effects, I do NOT think that they imply you have to start teaching children at an early age. I’m very worried that in a number of countries in Europe and Asia, people are going to start teaching earlier and earlier and will then be very disappointed that they don’t get better results and blame it on us, the researchers who told them to start early. Well, no, no, no. I’m not telling them to start early, I’m saying there are strong age effects with immigrants but what you find in the classroom is different. You cannot transfer those conclusions from immigrants to the classroom. So that’s one problem, overgeneralization of our own research.

The second problem in the language teaching field is the fact that so often budgets are cut starting from language teaching in particular. Language teaching is expensive the way it is now. You can give an introductory physics lecture to 200, 300 people, it doesn’t matter but, we all know
you cannot teach a language to a group of 200, 300 people. You have to have small sections, really 20 is already big and that makes instructions more expensive. In these days of budget cuts many universities are putting pressure on language departments to make their teaching almost entirely computerized and to save money that way. First of all, I’m not so convinced that they’ll all save a lot of money because developing curricula and buying computers are not exactly free. On top of that, if the goal is that people develop communicative skills in a second language, how far can we go with all this computer business? If there is one thing computers are still poor at, it is teaching a language. Clearly you can replace the teacher or the textbook with a computer for the most extreme forms of declarative knowledge that I was talking about. You can provide grammar rules, simple exercises, word lists and all of that on the computer, but when it comes to understanding what a student is trying to say in a second language and giving feedback on that, there is no computer program on earth that can do that. So that is the limitation that people outside of the profession don’t often realize. And it’s enormously ironic from my point of view that now we have finally all learned, when I say “all”, I mean not just happy few in academia in a couple of countries but worldwide a lot of language teachers know teaching should be communicative, it is very ironic that at this point when we realize how important communicative language teaching is we’re switching to computers, which are so bad at this communicative aspect, only good at presenting the structural aspect. So that’s another challenge.

Jimin: What kind of advice do you have for future second language researchers and teachers?

Dr. DeKeyser: The first thing any aspiring academics should know is that you’ll always have to work hard. It’s not going to be a forty-hour-per-week job or a 9 to 5 job. Most academics I know work just about every evening and just about every weekend, so you have to work hard and you’ll never get rich. But the interesting part of the job is, of course, that it’s hardly ever routine. Research, of course, by definition is not a routine, otherwise it wouldn’t be research. The teaching is not very routine either because you always have new students, somewhat new subject matters, so it is from that point of view, a challenging but very interesting profession. And you have to have a level of creativity and also the willingness to go through sometimes tedious boring detail to make things work as a researcher.

Dr. DeKeyser participated in this interview with enthusiasm and sincerity by sharing his ideas on various issues in SLA and by providing thoughtful and practical advice for future second language researchers and teachers. I believe his interview offers an opportunity for us to see a bigger picture and think about the role of researchers and teachers in SLA.

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