Interview with Dr. Joe Barcroft

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Joe Barcroft (Ph.D. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) is Professor of Spanish and Second Language Acquisition in the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures at Washington University in St. Louis. He is Language Program Supervisor: Spanish 101-308; Director of Teaching Assistant Training; and Co-Director of the Graduate Certificate in Language Instruction. He is a participating faculty member of the Program in Linguistics and holds affiliate appointments in the Program in Philosophy, Neuroscience, and Psychology, and in the Minor in Applied Linguistics. He teaches courses on language teaching methodology, second language acquisition, grammar and vocabulary acquisition, and Hispanic linguistics. Professor Barcroft’s research interests include second language vocabulary acquisition; input processing; processing resource allocation during lexical acquisition; the role of acoustic variability in language learning and speech processing; the bilingual mental lexicon; and psycholinguistic approaches to other issues in second language acquisition and bilingualism. His articles appear in journals such as Studies in Second Language Acquisition, Language Learning, Applied Psycholinguistics, Second Language Research, and The Modern Language Journal. His input-based incremental approach to second language vocabulary instruction, which is grounded in research findings on lexical input processing, is described in articles in Foreign Language Annals and Hispania. His current research projects focus on second language partial word form learning; effects of acoustic variability on vocabulary learning and auditory training; and the relationship between second language vocabulary learning and bilingual lexicosemantic representation. Professor Barcroft is also the Director of the Summer Language Institute in Spain. For more information about Dr. Barcroft, please visit his website: http://pages.wustl.edu/barcroft

L: How did you first become interested in the field and become an applied linguist?

J: That’s an excellent question. I originally started my undergrad being interested in pre-medicine at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), but prior to that I think I had always been interested in travelling abroad. At that point of my life, I lived in a city that did not provide a lot of opportunities to get exposed to a lot of people and languages but discovered the AFS (American Field Service) program and started meeting people from all around the world. I realized there were a lot of opportunities for study abroad, and I went and lived in Colombia for a year with a Rotary International program. That is when I became interested in language and became fluent in Spanish. When I went to UIUC, I started off taking a lot of pre-med courses and
math courses but just gradually took more language courses that focused more on literature because I was not really aware of many other options for content when studying language. During my first year of graduate work, I took a language teaching methodology course, and that was when I discovered other options for someone who really loves language. That was a really pivotal point for me. It was when I got to know the field of second language acquisition and applied linguistics. I went to San Diego after taking this course. I lived there for five years and worked at a private English language school and then decided to go back to grad school to study SLA. I went to UIUC and never looked back.

L: That was fascinating! What motivated your particular interest in lexical input processing research and Input-based Incremental Vocabulary Instruction?

J: I went to the program at UIUC; my dissertation director was Bill Van Patten. I have always been interested in input processing. Most of IP research has focused on sentence-level input processing for the acquisition of different types of morphosyntactic structures, but I have always been interested in vocabulary and particularly how it is the place where form meets meaning at a very basic level. I have always been drawn to getting at the basic of nuts and bolts of what language acquisition is about and how it relates to human memory/learning in general. You can really address these issues at the lexical level. People who were doing research on vocabulary at that time when I began focusing on vocabulary were not doing so from an input-processing perspective, so there was a general need and a lot of interesting questions to be explored.

L: Could you briefly describe some recent research projects that you have conducted or supervised?

J: There are several. One of them is the one I talked about earlier today (in the talk I gave for the symposium). That study, which I collaborated on with Shusaku Kida (he carried out the actual study), isolated the mapping component of vocabulary learning... This study involved homographs. L1 Japanese speakers learned L2 English “secondary meanings” of words. They were not necessarily “secondary” in any strict sense, but they were meanings that the learners had not previously acquired with regard to the L2 word forms in question. For example, “foot” on your leg versus to “foot” the bill. So, even though they already knew the word form “foot” and its L2 meaning as “foot on your leg” and the meaning of “foot the bill” in Japanese, they had not learned to map the word form “foot” to the “foot the bill” meaning prior to the study. In this way we isolated the mapping component of vocabulary meaning, giving us an opportunity to test the predictions of the TOPRA (Type of Processing – Resource Allocation) model from a new angle. It is a study that I really like, not only because of the predictions that it allowed us to test but also because of how it advances a novel technique designed to isolate the mapping component of vocabulary learning.
L: Have you experienced any difficulties in applying some theoretical findings obtained from experimental settings to authentic teaching or learning contexts?

J: One thing is applying them yourself; another thing is providing them to other people in hopes that they will rethink some of the ideas that they currently hold about vocabulary learning and teaching. You know the sentence-writing task I talked about and other tasks like the word-copying task. The findings of studies on these tasks were counter-intuitive to a lot of people, but I have always tried to emphasize that the nice thing about research is that it allows us to rethink what may at first be counter-intuitive and allow it to become more intuitive. It can be challenging at times, you know. When I studied input processing in the 90s, it did not occur to me how critical it is to distinguish between word form and word meaning until I started doing research on the effects of sentence writing. It was that research that shaped my ideas in this area and led to the development of the TOPRA model. So it’s important for both researchers and teachers to be open, to embrace the counterintuitive when research indicates that it is appropriate to do so instead of resisting it.

L: As a professor and program supervisor, what advice can you give for Ph.D students to be good researchers in this field?

J: Get all of the proper training that you need while you are still completing course work. Take advantage of the years that you have in graduate school. Take whatever courses you need because once you are out, it may become more difficult for you to update your research methodologies. In particular, with regard to the different instruments that we use in SLA research, these change over time, so try to equip yourself with a good range of both well established and recently developed research tools. Certainly after you graduate you can and should still continue to educate yourself regarding new research instruments and methodologies, but I think it’s important to try to do as much as possible on this front while you are in graduate school.

L: Finally, what advice do you have for second language researchers, especially for those who are interested in quantitative research?

J: Go to it! (Laugh) Be open to learning from data as opposed to trying to view data in a way that might meet your current expectations and keep up with the new instruments in the field.