Editors’ Message

Dear Reader,

On behalf of the editorial team, we are pleased to introduce the fifth issue of the MSU Working Papers in Second Language Studies. The MSU Working Papers in SLS is an open access publication, the content of which is distributed freely online. The materials are accessible without restrictions.

Ever since the inaugural issue, which was published in 2009, the Working Papers have been organized, written, reviewed, selected, proofread, and edited by volunteers affiliated with the Second Language Studies and TESOL programs at Michigan State University. The main purpose of the journal is to provide a platform for students to get familiar with the entire publication process through publishing the works they prepare during their studies including their course projects, qualifying research papers, and Master’s theses.

This issue of the Working Papers includes one full research paper. Lorena Valmori investigated foreign language teachers’ perception of their proficiency and their engagement in professional development. She also discusses how pedagogical contexts influence the dynamic complexity of motivational processes.

The Working Papers also showcases works in progress. This year, we accepted two research proposals and a literature review paper. It is our hopes that readers will send any helpful feedback to the authors. David Martinez Prieto proposes a study to investigate the roles of marked theme in L2 learners’ reading comprehension. Lianye Zhu’s proposal focuses on exploring the perception and production of the English voiceless interdental fricative by Chinese learners of English. Jieun Irene Ahn reviewed literature on attention, awareness, and noticing in SLA from a methodological point of view.

This issue contains interviews featuring MSU alumni. Each February, the Second Language Studies program holds a research symposium, where researchers from other universities are invited to give talks. This year we were fortunate enough to have presentations by two former SLS graduates. After the 2014 symposium, Hyung Jo Yoon interviewed Dr. Kim McDonough, and Talip Gonulal interviewed Dr. Luke Plonsky.

We conclude this issue with two textbook reviews. Phuong Thi Lan Nguyen reviewed LEAP: Learning English for Academic Purposes (Reading and Writing), by Julia Williams. Denisse M. Hinojosa reviewed Reading Explorer 2, by Paul MacIntyre.

Finally, in addition to the contributors to this issue, we would like to thank the volunteer section, copy, and layout editors. Their names are listed below. We are indebted to the anonymous reviewers who provided valuable feedback on various drafts of the articles. We also received support from Dr. Susan Gass, Dr. Debra Hardison, and the rest of the SLS department, and Russ Werner, who provided tech support for the Working Papers website. Without the help of these volunteers, the Working Papers would not be possible.
All of the volunteers listed (alphabetically) below are MSU students:

Section Editors:

- Ina Choi
- Kinsey Wethers
- Yangting Wang
- Yaqiong Cui

Copy Editors:

- Frances Johnson LaMielle
- Hyung-Jo Yoon
- Olga Leonidivna Khodakova

Layout Editor:

- Laurel Waller


Mostafa Papi
Ji-Hyun Park
Co-editors
How do Foreign Language Teachers Maintain their Proficiency? A Grounded Theory Approach

Lorena Valmori  
Second Language Studies Program  
Michigan State University  
valmoril@msu.edu

The recent increase in studies using the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2005) to investigate language teachers’ engagement (or lack thereof) in professional development (e.g., Hiver, 2013; Kubanyiova 2009; Kumazava, 2013) shows the increasing interest in bridging the research gap between language teacher education and teacher motivation. With the aim of contributing to this body of motivation research, this interview-based study uses a grounded theory approach to address the issues of how foreign language (FL) teachers in two types of Italian high schools (college preparation schools and vocational schools) experience and respond to changes in their proficiency. Findings show the influence of these pedagogical contexts on teachers’ proficiency and engagement in development as well as the dynamic complexity of motivational processes. When dealing with professional development, FL teachers face two main decision-making moments: 1) deciding whether or not to engage in professional development activities; 2) maintaining their engagement with or without a supportive community. Their decision to engage often depends on the emotional dissonance between teachers’ actual and possible L2 selves. The results have implications for designing in-service professional development courses with a bottom-up approach that take into consideration teachers’ needs according to their school environments and enhance teachers’ L2 selves’ emotional guiding power.

Research in SLA has long prioritized adult learners’ capacity to attain advanced L2 proficiency (or lack thereof) over the description of advanced L2 performance abilities and the necessary engagement to maintain them (Byrnes, 2012). Language learning is a life-long process and foreign language (FL) teachers are often considered one of the best examples of successful committed advanced learners. Arguably, their language proficiency and its improvement over time is crucial for them to be effective FL teachers (Banno, 2003; Reves & Medgyes, 1994; Vélez-Rendón, 2002) as the language is both the means and the objective of their teaching. Moreover, language proficiency development is important for building FL teachers’ identity because “their experiences as teachers are often situated on the same trajectory as their linguistic development” (Miller & Kubota, 2013, p. 246). The growing literature on language teacher education (see Schulz, 2000 and Vélez-Rendón, 2002 for overviews) has also shown that FL proficiency is interrelated with many other
factors such as previous experiences, pre-service programs, teachers’ beliefs, and teachers’ reflection and collaboration, which together contribute to language teachers’ FL development. In her historical overview of FL teacher development, Schulz (2000) highlighted that “[t]he preparation of … FL teachers has been a frequently discussed topic during the past century” (p.495). However, to better understand how FL teachers manage their dual role as both life-long FL learners and FL teachers as well as grapple with what motivates them to continue their development, empirical research should also address the more neglected area of in-service teachers’ development.

The recent growth in the number of studies that have used Dörnyei’s (2005) L2 Motivational Self System to investigate language teachers’ engagement (or lack thereof) in professional development (e.g., Hiver, 2013; Kubanyiova 2009; Kumazava, 2013) shows the increasing interest in bridging the gap in research between language teacher education and teachers’ motivation. This paper seeks to contribute to the field by delving into the actual practices that in-service FL teachers use and the obstacles they encounter in maintaining their proficiency. I begin by reviewing previous findings about the role of FL teachers’ proficiency and motivation in teaching. Next, I explain the rationale for this qualitative study and for a grounded theory approach. I then provide the method and results of the analysis by means of excerpts and a flow chart which summarizes the proposed grounded theory of FL teachers’ engagement in maintaining proficiency. I conclude with implications of the present study for FL teachers’ professional development and for future studies.

**Foreign Language Teachers’ Proficiency**

In his discussion of teachers’ language ability, Banno (2003) cited several studies (e.g., Brown, 1994; Hadley & Yoshioka-Hadley, 1996; Harmer, 1998; Shimizu, 1995) that identified sufficient oral proficiency, standard accent, clear pronunciation, and good grammar knowledge as essential characteristics of a good language teacher. Arguably, the concept of FL teachers’ proficiency is multifaceted and needs to be defined and contextualized in its relationship with teaching experience and teaching approaches.

Definitions of FL proficiency can range from native-like attainment (see Abrahamsson & Hyltenstam, 2008, 2009) to Piller’s (2002) use-oriented description as a temporary phenomenon specific to context, audience, and medium. Looking at proficiency from a cognitive perspective, the former argued that “native like ultimate attainment in adult learners is, in principle, nonexistent” (p.499), as near-native speakers differed from native speakers when some L2 features were analyzed in greater detail. The latter supported a sociolinguistic situated concept of proficiency which is more attainable. Arguably, FL teachers should master the language they teach; however, their proficiency level can vary and be specific to their teaching context. In Italy, where the current study is situated, during the 2013 national teachers’ competitive exam for tenure positions, the bar for FL
teachers’ proficiency level was set at a minimum of C1 (proficient user) according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Language teachers in Italian high schools are therefore expected to be able to “express [themselves] fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions…[and] use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes” (CEFR, 2001, p.24). Such command of the FL is essential because, as explained in Chambless (2012), there is a possible causal connection between teachers’ target language (TL) proficiency and the teaching and learning that take place in the classroom. According to her, “[FL teachers] have to provide abundant and varied input as well as guide students to interact, interpret and negotiate meaning” (p.144). FL teachers’ proficiency therefore seems to impact students’ learning directly, as the amount of TL spoken in class, and the teaching approach adopted as a result of teachers’ proficiency deeply inform students’ learning process.

Native and Non-native Speaker Teachers

A survey of over 200 EFL teachers (Reves & Medgyes, 1994) showed that many non-native speaker teachers felt insecure about their FL proficiency, with negative consequences on their self-efficacy. The discrepancy between the high expectations on FL teachers’ proficiency and their insecurity about it can undermine teachers’ confidence and motivation. Horwitz (1996), in her research on teachers’ foreign language anxiety, pointed out that language teachers are expected to be experts in their subject matter and speak flawlessly in front of the class, but like any other teacher, they have some knowledge gaps in their teaching specialty and there is always the possibility of mistakes and vocabulary lapses. Horwitz claimed that anxiety and inferiority complexes in foreign language teachers are caused by the pursuit of an idealized level of proficiency set by a hard-to-attain native-speaker model.

Medgyes (2001) argued, in his comparison of native English speaker teachers and non-native English speaker teachers, that both types of teachers are potentially equally effective, as the former provide language models to students, while the latter are learner models. Their respective strengths and weaknesses balance each other out, but only when non-native English speaker teachers have high overall language proficiency. Medgyes claimed that “the ideal non-native English speaker teacher is someone who has achieved near-native proficiency in English” and therefore “the most important professional duty that [non-native language teachers] have to perform is to make linguistic improvements in their [target language]” (p.440). The “professional duty” advocated by Medgyes is often left to FL teachers’ own discretion and it can be overshadowed by contingent situations such as lack of time or lack of collaborative support among others. In light of the importance of language teachers’ proficiency for their profession and their students, how FL teachers maintain their proficiency and their sustained motivation warrant investigation.

Students’ and Teachers’ Motivation
Ushioda and Dörnyei (2012) maintained that “[l]anguage learning is a sustained and often tedious process and [they] felt that the secret of successful learners was their possession of a superordinate vision that kept them on track” (p.25). Practicing and maintaining FL proficiency over the course of one’s career involves teachers’ intrinsic motivation, which is defined by Dörnyei (2001) as “the inherent joy of pursuing a meaningful activity related to one’s subject area of interest, in an autonomous manner, within a vivacious collegial community, with self-efficacy.” (p.159). The level of effort and persistence can be influenced and modified by external conditions and constraints of the social context of the job, such as stress, restricted autonomy, insufficient self-efficacy and an inadequate career structure. Over the course of a decade, Dörnyei’s framework of L2 motivation developed into a self-system approach, in an effort to move away from linear models and take into consideration the dynamic interaction of internal and contextual processes that shape engagement in learning. His L2 Motivational Self-System (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009) is based on the motivational power of future self-guides. Building on Markus and Nurius (1986) seminal paper, Dörnyei’s model is made up of two main types of possible selves: 1) ideal self, what one would like to become (hopes, aspirations, or wishes); and 2) ought-to self, what one believes one ought to become (based on one’s sense of duties, obligations, or moral responsibilities). The possible selves’ promotion (ideal self) or prevention (ought-to self) actions are triggered by self-regulatory mechanisms. Higgins’s (1987, 1998) Self-discrepancy Theory explains that the tension between learners’ L2 actual self and their future selves can transform motivation into action to reduce the discrepancy if learners’ emotions are involved. Only when strong emotions such as fear, hope or obligation are tied to the L2 future selves can self-guides operate their motivational properties. The L2 Motivational Self System has become a widely used paradigm to investigate learners’ motivation to engage in learning (e.g., Csízér & Kormos, 2009; Ryan, 2009; Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009); however, only a few researchers have used it to investigate teachers’ L2 motivational selves.

In keeping with Dörnyei’s (2005) L2 Motivational Self-System and Higgins’s (1987) Self-discrepancy theory, Kubanyiova (2007, 2009) developed a theoretical model of Language Teacher Conceptual Change that provides a framework to understand “why teachers engage in specific classroom practices [and also] why some of them develop … while others remain unaltered” (p. 318). The framework is based on the construct of a Possible Language Teacher Self. In this model, the ideal self represents language teachers’ aspirations, the ought-to self represents teachers’ perceived external obligations with regards to their work, and the feared self represents possible negative consequences when obligations are not lived up to. In her study on in-service EFL teachers in Slovakia, the perceived discrepancy and emotional dissonance between teachers’ actual self and their ideal, ought-to or feared selves failed to trigger teachers’ engagement in reform activities. Such activities contradicted teachers’ ought-
How do Foreign Language Teachers Maintain their Proficiency?

Students look for role models who are committed and believe in what they do (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

In light of the impact of FL teachers’ proficiency and motivation to improve on FL education, Chambless (2012) called for more empirical studies, especially on “what happens to teachers’ proficiency level post-graduation [and whether] in-service teachers tend to maintain their [...] oral proficiency” (p. 157). Such empirical research is needed to fill the gap between pre-service language teacher education and what FL teachers encounter over the course of their teaching career. When professional development is not compulsory and is expected to be teacher-initiated, it is essential to understand how initiation mechanisms work and how they can be triggered. An investigation of data about FL teachers’ engagement in professional development can shed light on (a) FL teachers’ needs at different stages of their career and in different environments, and (b) how best to create conditions for bottom-up professional development to support TL maintenance and improvement.

The Exploratory Quantitative Study

Research (Bateman, 2008, Chacon, 2005, Cooper, 2004; Eslami & Fatahi, 2008; Fraga-Cañadas, 2010; Yilmaz, 2011) has shown that teachers’ self-perceived inadequate proficiency is reflected in more cautious instructional approaches, a decrease in self-efficacy, and less use of the target language in class. Moreover, self-perceived inadequate proficiency could send a negative message to students about their language learning abilities and ultimately provide a negative role model for language
How do Foreign Language Teachers Maintain their Proficiency

In particular, in Fraga-Cañadas’s (2010) study, surveys indicated that Spanish non-native speaker teachers in American high schools experienced fossilization, frustration, and a decline in proficiency due to teaching low level students for a long time, lack of direct contact with native speakers, and lack of time for practicing the TL outside the classroom.

In contrast to Fraga-Cañadas’s results, an exploratory survey with Italian FL high-school teachers showed a significant, positive change in proficiency (e.g., speaking, pronunciation, listening and reading), and engagement in activities (e.g., speaking the TL and general media use in the TL) to maintain their proficiency over the course of their teaching careers. Moreover, analysis showed an effect of type of school, as teachers in college preparation schools were almost six times more likely to improve their writing skills and five times more likely to improve their speaking skills than teachers in vocational schools. The relationship highlighted earlier (e.g., Eslami & Fatahi, 2008; Fraga-Cañadas, 2010; Yilmaz, 2011) between teachers’ proficiency and teaching approach was corroborated by results that showed that teachers who perceived improvements in their proficiency were four times more likely to use a communicative approach than individuals who perceived that their proficiency had not improved. Finally, regarding the relationship between proficiency and motivation, the data indicated that teachers in different types of schools had similar levels of motivation when they perceived that their proficiency had improved over time. However, teachers’ motivation in vocational schools increased further when they self-reported either a stabilization or decrease in their proficiency. Their motivation also increased when teachers in college preparation schools felt their proficiency had decreased. These apparently counterintuitive results show the limitations of linear models in L2 motivation research, as temporal and contextual variability also play a role in the dynamic complexity of motivational processes.

Further, Ushioda and Dörnyei (2012) called for more qualitative methods of inquiry to complement the quantitative paradigm “in an effort to address the dynamic and situated complexity of L2 motivation” (p.402). The current qualitative study on teachers’ engagement in professional development is therefore a follow-up research project inspired by the unexpected findings of my exploratory quantitative study. The qualitative inquiry left open many questions regarding the possible reasons and the nature of teachers’ engagement (or lack thereof) in maintaining their proficiency. By means of semi-structured interviews, the present study delves into foreign language teachers’ perception of their progress in language proficiency, its contribution to in-class practices, and the nature and form of their commitment to maintain it. I analyzed interview data with a grounded theory approach to ensure a bottom-up perspective. Within this framework, issues and possible trajectories for meaningful in-service teachers’ professional development practices emerged from the analysis of the data.

A Grounded Theory Approach
How do Foreign Language Teachers Maintain their Proficiency

Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) *Grounded Theory Approach* refers to a theory that emerges from data which are systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process. In this study based on semi-structured interviews, I combined Strauss and Corbin’s systematic approach with Charmaz’s (2006) interpretive one. While the former provides structured theory-building procedures from emerging themes, the latter, within a constructivist framework, highlights the researcher’s interpreting role, as theories are grounded in the views and perspectives of the individuals involved. In conceptualizing the research interview not just as a tool, but as a social practice (Talmy, 2010), the discourse between the interviewer and the interviewee is seen as being situated and co-constructed by them. In other words, the research interview is a site for investigation itself, where the “voice” of the interlocutors is situationally contingent, and both the “what” (the content) and the “how” (the linguistic and interactional resources used) collaboratively generate the data. Thus, from this perspective, not only the data but also their analysis are collaboratively produced (Charmaz, 2006; Talmy, 2010).

While case studies make up much of the qualitative research concerning FL teachers (e.g., Fraga-Cañada, 2009, Ryan, 1998; Sarroub 2001), there is a paucity of studies in this methodology (i.e., grounded theory) which is oriented toward theory-building (e.g., Pajak & Blasé, 1989; Watze, 2007). In his longitudinal study on how nine novice high school FL teachers in the U.S. changed their pedagogical knowledge in the first two years of teaching, Watze (2007) explained that instead of studying individual participants, grounded theory analytical procedures “facilitated consideration of the data as a single unit and helped to develop an explanatory theoretical framework across participants” (p.68). The aim is therefore to go beyond single cases, and to consider common (or diverging) emergent trajectories participants took within the broader context. With the same intent, building on the constructivist approach (Charmaz, 2006) to maintain participants’ presence throughout, I conducted semi-structured interviews in this study to enable teachers to address the issues of proficiency and challenges in maintaining it in their own words and to be able to reconstruct common trajectories out of the whole data set. As explained by Miller, Bonner, and Francis (2006), with this methodology “issues of importance to participants emerge from the stories that they tell about an area of interest that they have in common with the researcher” (p. 3). The research is thus guided by questions on an issue of common interest. This enabled me to use an inductive approach, without preconceived ideas to prove or disprove, but an interest to shed light on the issue through the data.

**Research questions**

The following research questions guided the interview-based study:

1. *How do foreign language teachers perceive the change in their proficiency during the course of their teaching career?*
2. What do foreign language teachers do to maintain their proficiency over time?

3. How can foreign language teachers’ perceived proficiency influence their teaching practices?

Methodology

The qualitative nature of the current study requires an introduction of the Italian high school context where the study is situated. After the description of the context, I introduce the participants, my positionality as a researcher in this context, and the data collection procedures.

Participants and Teaching context

The context. This study is situated in the Italian high school system, which comprises three types of high schools: college preparation, technical, and vocational. They differ from each other in terms of final language learning goals and levels, types of students, and teaching approaches. The high school system offers the possibility of studying a limited range of foreign languages, which are unevenly distributed: 97.8% of students study English, 26.7% French, 7.5% Spanish, and 5.8% German (Eurydice, 2012). The Italian Ministry of Education has set the final proficiency level for college preparation schools as B2+/C1 (MIUR, 2005) on the CEFR, and B2 for technical and vocational schools (INDIRE, 2010). Students in college preparation schools are generally more inclined to study and tend to continue their studies after graduation. Learning one or more foreign languages, in particular English, is for them part and parcel of a well-rounded education. Students in technical schools receive in-depth instruction in one specific area (e.g., chemistry, mechanics, business) and, depending on their future goals, they might see learning a foreign language as peripheral in their education. Students in vocational schools are more inclined to study practical subject matters and receive training designed to prepare them for vocations such as plumber, mechanic, and electrician. They often have variable academic performances and had behavioral issues during their previous schooling, thus learning a language can be a challenging endeavor for them.

The three school environments (college preparation school, technical school and vocational school) present teachers with very different challenges. Therefore, it is understandable that a long teaching experience in one type of school could affect and inform teaching approaches, teachers’ proficiency, and their engagement in maintaining it.

The teachers. Participants were nine Italian FL high school teachers (seven female and one male) from a pool of 84 FL teachers who took part in an exploratory online survey. After taking the anonymous survey, these nine teachers consented to follow-up interviews. Sampling was both purposeful (foreign language teachers with different lengths of teaching experience working in different types of high schools) and convenient (volunteers). This self-selected sample of teachers cannot be considered representative of the population of Italian FL high school teachers, while their voluntary participation in the study can be considered a sign of their active interest...
How do Foreign Language Teachers Maintain their Proficiency

Table 1. Participants’ information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Years taught</th>
<th>Language taught</th>
<th>Current type of school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suzy</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>College preparation school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloria</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>College preparation school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>College preparation school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>College preparation school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christy</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Vocational school and College prep.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Vocational school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanya</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Vocational school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Vocational school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>Vocational school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and commitment to their professional development.

The women’s ages spanned from late thirties to early fifties and the man was in his fifties. To ensure participants’ confidentiality, I used pseudonyms throughout this paper. All teachers had studied foreign languages and literatures at university, except one (Lucy) who studied translation and interpretation. While five teachers had worked in different types of schools, John had only worked in vocational schools and Lucy, Betty and Gloria had worked only in college preparation schools. At the time of the interviews, four teachers were working in vocational schools, four in a college preparation school, and one had classes in both types of schools. Table 1 summarizes the main information about the participants.

**Researcher’s positionality statement.** As a researcher and former instructor in the Italian context, I was able to view the issue of teachers’ engagement in professional development from both an emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspective. On the one hand, I knew the context of Italian high schools as an insider; on the other hand, my current role in a university context enabled me to take an outsider’s perspective. My experience as a former high school teacher facilitated my contact with teachers via my former colleagues and gaining their trust. My stance as a member of the teachers’ community by virtue of my former teaching experience was clear from the teachers’ frequent use of high school jargon (e.g., CLIL\(^1\) and LEND\(^2\)), showing the underlying idea that we shared a common ground of knowledge and experience. This stance enabled me to lead the interview in the form of a conversation between colleagues where teachers felt comfortable to talk without feeling judged by an outsider.

**Material and Procedures**

---

\(^1\) CLIL: Content and Language Integrated Learning.

\(^2\) LEND: Lingua e Nuova Didattica (language and new didactics).
The present study comprises nine interviews with the nine Italian FL teachers mentioned earlier who worked in two different types of high schools in Italy (college preparation schools and vocational schools). The interviews took place in June 2013 as part of a larger study that also included an anonymous online survey about FL teachers’ experiences and professional development. The interview questions (see Appendix) were based on the on-line survey and were designed as follow-up to expand previous quantitative data. The interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes each and took place via Skype or in person. All interviews were recorded, using the computer software Audacity, transcribed, and translated from Italian into English. During the interviews I applied the ‘ethics of care’ advocated by Kubanyiova (2008) for situated research. Acknowledging issues with proficiency, especially when they are related to one’s career, can be face-threatening for teachers and undermine their self-esteem and the perception of their self-efficacy in class. To respect participants’ boundaries, no further questions were asked if participants showed embarrassment or were not at ease with the topic. Research findings were shared with participants at the end of the project in order to assure a fair distribution of research benefits (Christians, 2000).

Data Analysis

Building on Strauss and Corbin (1998), I analyzed the data using a bottom-up approach, first with an open coding system followed by an axial coding system. Through recursive readings of the data, I coded the interview data by circling and highlighting participants’ words and phrases related to recurring topics that emerged. Subsequently, I identified the central phenomenon (the axis) and the different properties and dimensions around it, by making links between the codes and grouping them into the three main themes. For example, codes such as “learning how to explain the rules”, “learning the grammar explicitly”, “learning English for specific purposes”, and “improving fluency by living abroad” were different aspects of the theme “changes in proficiency” with two sub categories “changes due to teaching” and “changes due to other reasons”.

After exploring interviewees’ concepts of proficiency (research question 1), open-ended questions tapped into their language learning process as learners and teachers (research question 2), and the proficiency-teaching relationship (research question 3). The main focus was to (1) understand how teachers experience and respond to a change in their foreign language proficiency, and (2) form a theoretical framework that could provide explanations for how foreign language teachers develop their proficiency as well as account for variations.

Results

Following the coding steps suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998), the recursive coding process between the nine interviews revealed three main themes: (1) changes in proficiency, (2) activities to maintain
Table 2. *Summary of themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Changes in proficiency</td>
<td>How teaching or other events have changed and influenced teachers’ proficiency and knowledge.</td>
<td>“I started from a good level but then I studied a lot on my own over the years to prepare my classes and I improved.” (Betty)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Changes due to teaching</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Changes due to other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reasons</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Activities to maintain</td>
<td>In which activities teachers engage to maintain their proficiency.</td>
<td>“I read, watch movies and I also go to professional development courses. Ah, of course I go abroad in summer.” (Tanya)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>proficiency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Useful practices</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Obstacles and problems</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Relationship between FL</td>
<td>The relationship teachers see between their proficiency and teaching.</td>
<td>“Speaking English every morning in class helps me, but it also helps my students. I practice … if you always expose them to the language it is easier for them.” (Betty)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficiency and FL teaching</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

proficiency, and (3) the relationship between FL proficiency and FL teaching. Table 2 summarizes the themes and provides an example for each theme.

Within each theme some patterns emerged: Two teachers, Lucy and John, often had opposite points of view about both changes they experienced in their respective pedagogical contexts and what they thought was useful for them to maintain their FL proficiency. On the other hand, the other teachers, especially Tanya, Stephanie, Christy, and Julie, had more moderate positions regarding the differences between the two types of schools. This could be due to the fact that the latter were vocational-school teachers with experience in teaching at other types of schools, while Lucy and John had only taught in one type of school (college preparation school and vocational school, respectively). Their long experience in a single school environment made their views representative of the two ends of the continuum of Italian high-school education system. For this reason, while the voices of all nine teachers are intertwined to construct a model of teachers’ engagement in professional development, the excerpts chosen for this study are taken mainly from Lucy’s and John’s interviews to give a clearer sense of the difference between school environments.

The following sections report the findings of the analysis to answer the research questions that guided the study.

First, I provide the teachers’ definition of
proficiency as a background to understanding the changes teachers perceived in their proficiency (research question 1), then I discuss what they perceived to be useful activities to maintain proficiency (research question 2), and finally I report teachers’ reflections on the relationship between FL proficiency and FL teaching (research question 3).

**Teachers’ Definitions of Proficiency**

During the interviews, the teachers provided a definition of FL proficiency. Their definitions were very similar and could be summarized as the ability to communicate (i.e., convey and understand meaning) in the target language. Each teacher clarified what he or she thought to be key aspects in operationalizing and evaluating proficiency, and their answers varied from knowing the necessary lexicon (e.g., Tanya: “I always tell my students that if they use the right words even if the grammar is all wrong people will understand them”), having good pronunciation (e.g. Stephanie: “if they don’t pronounce the words right they won’t be understood”), being able to use strategies (e.g. Lucy: “it is not necessary to know the exact word for each situation, but it is necessary to find a word, an alternative way”), and, finally, to implementing intercultural competence (e.g. Tanya: “an efficient FL speaker can adapt the way he/she speaks according to the different interlocutors”). This definition, with all its different nuances, shows that teachers perceive the foreign language as a tool to achieve both task-based goals and general intercultural communication. Most of the interviewees set high proficiency standards for themselves and stated that their goal as learners was to become like a native speaker. Defining native-likeness as a goal for their ideal self (Dörnyei, 2005; Kubanyiova, 2009) already hinted at the teachers’ drive and commitment in pursuing life-long learning and engaging in activities to maintain proficiency. However, they admitted to setting less ambitious goals for their students because the communicative competence they wished them to achieve clashed with the reality of their teaching environment, syllabus, and time limitations. Therefore, depending on the type of school, they had to set very clear, limited, and functional goals related to the students’ future language needs in their prospective workplaces.

**Changes in Proficiency**

In light of the working definition of proficiency provided in the last section (i.e., the ability to convey and understand meaning in the TL), all teachers talked about overall positive changes in their proficiency that occurred during the course of their careers, both due to their teaching the target language and other factors. They all acknowledged that their FL proficiency was good (or very good) at graduation, but once they started teaching, they nevertheless needed to develop a deeper understanding of the mechanical, pragmatic, and semantic aspects of the language together with other strategic skills related to their type of school and students. For example, Christy admitted that she “knew [she was] saying it right, but [she] couldn’t explain the rule” and she “had to study the grammar [she] taught.”
Moreover, coming from a literature background, they all had a rich vocabulary, but it fell short of the lexicon for the specific purposes they were supposed to teach. For example, Stephanie reported “learning words like ‘invoice’, ‘promissory notes’ or other specific business terms by teaching them.”

The two excerpts below show how teaching in different school settings affected teachers’ proficiency in somewhat opposite directions. In Excerpt 1 Lucy, who after graduation spent years working abroad, reports how teaching in a college preparation school challenged her already high proficiency in Spanish. In contrast, Excerpt 2 shows how John, who never lived abroad and started teaching upon graduation, experienced a different type of challenge in teaching English for specific purposes in vocational schools.

Excerpt 1: Lucy

Then […] I started teaching. I had to look at the language from the perspective of a teacher. […] Learning and using the language is one thing, teaching it is another. So I had to learn a lot of things, the way to explain the rules, to reflect on the associations, I had to enrich my vocabulary with all the synonyms and opposites, these were things that I didn’t need in my previous jobs. These things help the learners to organize their information. Teaching has a different goal, so it needs different competences that you can develop with the experience and the requirements of teaching.

Excerpt 2: John

I have no time for certain aspects of the language. The language is adapted to the usage…to what I need it for. In class I have to use an impoverished language, because through the language I also convey some content. Do you know CLIL? I convey business content through the language, and they understand me. Through English I teach the language and I also teach something else. For example, we’re talking about franchising, promissory notes, or other specific business contracts…All these contents, they don’t know them in Italian either and they have to grasp them in English. And I see that they learn something. I don’t talk about grammar.

Lucy’s and John’s students had opposite needs and, as a consequence, teaching may have led these teachers to opposite changes in their proficiency. For Lucy, it meant enriching her vocabulary in order to help her college-bound students learn synonyms and strategies, give students more input, and, finally, acquire the necessary metalinguistic knowledge to be able to explain the rules. On the other hand, for John, teaching meant simplifying his lexicon to make sure he used the “right words at the right level”, to enable comprehension of new concepts, and to avoid his vocational students’ frustration. For John (and some of the other teachers in vocational schools) the proficiency change
was a trade-off, which meant sacrificing the development of vocabulary and grammar for comprehension and content. They nevertheless perceived the change as a global growth, in which the neglected linguistic aspects were compensated by newly learned pedagogical skills necessary for their particular environment. John, for example, commented: “If I lost some words, the flip side is that I can better manage the class […] knowing the language is not enough to be a good teacher”. Christy’s experience was along the same line when she said: “Teaching didn’t give me a better FL competence, but from a methodological point of view I improved.” The positive feeling of an ongoing compensation process corroborates findings in previous research (Berry, 1990; Fraga-Canadas, 2010), which showed that teachers valued ‘good methodology’ as sine qua non for teaching and a way to compensate for a lack of linguistic knowledge.

Finally, all interviewees perceived proficiency changes as necessary and inevitable. As the language they teach changes, they have to keep up with it, and this was clearly stated by Lucy when she said: “If I spoke as I used to when I graduated 20 years ago, I would sound like a book of the 18th century.” Tanya also had a similar concern and said: “I keep up with the changes in the language by watching recent movies.” Moreover, as Lucy stated, “there is a change because there is always something new to learn […] teaching helps learning […] as we keep on growing, we keep on changing.” The analysis showed that changes in teachers’ proficiency can take different trajectories shaped by the needs that emerged in the different school environments, which influenced teachers’ use of vocabulary, grammar, and methodologies. Nevertheless, changes are overall perceived as growth and improvements as they helped to increase teachers’ self-efficacy. This is in line with previous findings (Bandura, 1997; Yilmaz, 2011) on the relevance of teachers’ language proficiency for their perceived self-efficacy.

**Useful Activities to Maintain Proficiency**

When talking about activities available for teachers to maintain their proficiency, the divide between the teacher in college preparation schools and the ones in vocational schools became increasingly evident. All of the teachers talked about several types of exposure to foreign language and culture that were available, such as the Internet, TV and movies in the FL, newsletters by teachers’ associations, books, summer trips and a nationwide foreign language teachers’ organization (LEND) which organized activities for professional development for the different languages. In Excerpt 3, Lucy paints an enthusiastic picture of a cohesive group of Spanish teachers in her school (and other college preparation schools in the city) who collaborate and share knowledge and useful experiences. In contrast, Excerpt 4 follows John’s account of his unsuccessful attempts over the years to set up meaningful professional development activities in his school. His proactive attitude was not aligned with his colleagues’ interests, and John was left alone to deal with professional development. In this excerpt, he also
expresses his attitude toward the activities offered by the English section of the professional-development group LEND.

Excerpt 3: Lucy
Ah, and then we go to the LEND meetings. Our coordinator is the national president for Spanish. The Spanish group is very good and compact. We’re friends, there are teachers from different schools, we like meeting up, some are writing textbooks or they bring new textbooks for us to have a look at them. We share a lot of information. We want to be up to date, to keep up with the language and culture. There is a common constructive attitude. I must say we’ve been lucky, it all comes down to it in the end: the people.

Excerpt 4: John
In the past I used to read more than now […] but I drifted apart from literature because…I don’t think it was useful. [at LEND]. They are self-referential, a microcosm of literature. The distance is too big. In some schools there are completely different worlds. But even where I am [vocational school], if you value some aspects you can do something positive. How can you think to teach literature in a vocational school? […] From next year…I don’t know. Internet is my main source of self-professional development. […] Of course I’m missing the spoken part…and listening…I’m missing communicating directly.

While Lucy seemed to have a rich network of relationships that provided plenty of opportunities for professional and language development (“We’re friends […] We’ve been lucky. It all comes down to it in the end: the people”), John felt isolated and was left alone to deal with what he called self-professional development (“the Internet is my main source of self-professional development […] of course I’m missing communicating directly”). The excerpts show the importance of a supportive and collaborative environment (or lack thereof) in determining teachers’ engagement in professional-development activities. All teachers were concerned about maintaining and developing their proficiency and Tanya summarized her situation by saying: “If you don’t do anything, you’ll lose it.” However, only the teachers who taught (or had taught) in a college preparation school seemed to see the activities offered by LEND as a valuable resource. Betty, who had always taught in a college preparation school, said that “[she] went to a lot of courses organized by LEND … it was very useful because [they] shared their experiences, spoke in English, even though now there were just a few of [them].” Suzy noted that as a novice teacher 30 years ago LEND had been crucial for her in an era when the access to sources was not easy. At that time “the experienced teachers used to read about the newest methodologies and conveyed the gist to the novices. They were mediators… when [Suzy] understood how to access those materials [she] started doing it on [her]
own." Some of the other teachers knew about the organization but, because of time constraints, they valued and viewed other resources as more useful for their needs. For example, Stephanie commented: “I know about them […] but I don’t have first-hand experience with it. I think it is more useful to speak among colleagues of the same school and share methods and content.”

John underlined the strong inclination of the organization LEND toward college preparation school teachers’ needs and interests. He felt that they had no room and interest for the needs of teachers from a variety of school environments. He also felt that the different types of schools were “different worlds” and he did not see a bridge between them. Left alone by his own colleagues who for different reasons (lack of time, motivation, interest, or willingness to share) did not participate in the activities he organized in his school, he still valued professional development. John considered the Internet his main source of professional development, but he recognized its shortcomings. To him, a community willing to share was the only way to practice active communication.

John’s colleagues’ behavior is in line with findings in the teacher motivation domain, where dissonance between teachers’ ideals and their educational environment can be detrimental to their motivation and commitment (Kubanyiova, 2009). John explained their lack of commitment by reporting the words of a colleague of his who did not want to participate in the professional development activities organized by the school: “He said he didn’t want to waste his time with professional development. He said that the level [of his students] was so low that he didn’t even need a degree for the English he was teaching […] the context is so demotivating.” Nevertheless, this same context did not discourage John and the other vocational-school teachers interviewed from looking for professional development. Context dissonance can have an opposite impact according to its interplay with Possible Language Teacher Selves (ideal, ought-to, and feared) (Hiver, 2013; Kubanyiova, 2009). In particular, context dissonance triggers development when teachers feel there is a gap to be reduced (discrepancy between actual and possible selves with emotional involvement) and their engagement in development matches their intrinsic aspirations. On the other hand, a dissonant context hinders development when there is no tension between actual and possible selves, and/or when the ought-to selves (their perceived external obligations and expectations) and ideal selves (identity goals and aspirations) contradict one another. In the case of the nine teachers, development seems like a way to reconcile the actual selves with their ambitious goal to become “like native speakers” and/or meet professional expectations. This is shown by Stephanie’s comment: “[I have no time] I just do what is ethically correct.” Tanya also expressed an ethical concern about teachers’ proficiency: “If teachers’ proficiency is high, school will form better students and everybody will benefit from it.”

However, the professional development courses organized by LEND did not match John’s possible selves and he pursued development alone, although he felt
sharing experiences was the way to grow and therefore experienced frustration in his colleagues’ lack of collaboration. These findings corroborate Kubanyiova’s (2009) results, which showed how two types of dissonances can trigger engagement: 1) actual versus future selves; 2) actual self versus unfavorable context factors. The former is evidenced by many comments of the teachers in this study (e.g., Lucy, Tanya, Stephanie, Betty) who are driven by the aspiration to become “like native speakers”. The latter is exemplified by John and the colleagues he talks about, who are influenced differently by the same unfavorable contextual factors, probably because of their different internalized ideal and ought-to selves.

**Relationship between FL Proficiency and FL Teaching**

All teachers acknowledged that FL proficiency was a precondition for their job. This common ground is summarized by Lucy’s statement: “If I don’t know the language, what am I doing there? I mean…it is obvious.” As noted by Stephanie, her FL proficiency is “a matter of personal pride”, “gives [her] confidence and authority”, and “is a guarantee for the students”. In spite of her high FL proficiency, Tanya admitted that in her vocational school “[she] speak[s] in English in class only when there is a picture in the book and [she] ask[s] questions to describe it.” This is allegedly due to students’ low level, but can also have other reasons as similar situations are also described by teachers in other types of schools. Suzy, for example, at a college preparation school, also admitted that in class she did not speak in the TL the whole time. Experience helped her to overcome her fear of making mistakes and also to “adopt methodologies that enabled [her] not to speak for the whole hour…as one goes with what one feels stronger with.” Stephanie encountered a similar experience and explained that at first she did not speak English in class because of her “immaturity” and inexperience, as she thought it was not natural to speak to students in the target language when they knew she was Italian. She reported “getting there little by little”, by gaining authority and overcoming her sense of being fake. She also added that speaking well in the target language in the classroom served as a warning for the students that they could not get away with being lazy and speaking their L1 in class.

Excerpts 5 and 6 show how both Lucy and John, in their respective school environments, conceived FL use in class as the foundation of their teaching practices and a crucial point for their students’ learning process.

**Excerpt 5: Lucy**

For what I need to do, my proficiency level is…I have an excellent proficiency. It is fundamental for the students because they need a role model. They also learn a little by imitating a model, not only studying. And of course if they are continuously exposed to good models they learn more, also unconsciously. […]

**Excerpt 6: John**
I put up skits, this makes you use simple words [...] the ones they know. You repeat them and you enhance their ability to communicate. [...] The native speaker tends to teach sentences that you’re not able to generate over and over again. This way of teaching is limited. The non-native speaker suggests a mechanism of building and deconstructing the language, and this has more value. I put the student and his/her limits as the center. In order to do this, you have to have been a student yourself before.

Both excerpts suggest that in the classroom, FL teachers are role models for their students, who can learn language and strategies from life-long learners. To be learner models (Medgyes, 2001), teachers first need to be confident with their proficiency and then to overcome the fear that the students may not understand everything or want to speak the foreign language with a non-native speaker. John underscored that the non-native speaker teacher can understand his/her students’ needs and frustrations better and can provide them with more accessible language samples and strategies to use it. This is in line with Medgyes (1994), who stated that non-native speaker teachers, through self-awareness, develop empathy that enables them to adapt their output to the learners’ level and needs. Along the same line, Julie reported that students negatively commented on a very proficient teacher that could not connect to their needs by saying “since she is so good, she should have stayed at university.” For learners, their teachers’ perfect command of the TL is therefore not the main and only important characteristic. Teachers admitted coming to terms with the unattainable native-speaker model as clarified by Betty’s comment: “I don’t feel inferior if I don’t speak perfect English.” Nevertheless, teachers also said that their good proficiency directly affected their confidence in teaching and therefore their perceived professional self-efficacy. Self-efficacy (or lack thereof), as demonstrated in the case of supportive and unsupportive school environments in the previous section, can trigger the desire to improve proficiency and consequently engage in professional development activities. What makes the difference is once again the emotional strength of possible future selves. The interviewees underscored that their efforts to improve were twofold: they wanted to improve for themselves (to feel confident in class) and for their students’ sake. In this case, teachers’ ideal and ought-to selves seem to exert the necessary emotional dissonance with teachers’ actual selves to lead to self-initiated development. When the mismatch between actual and future selves does not have the emotional strength and the necessary plausibility and practicality, negative self-efficacy beliefs can be detrimental for initiating development in the same way as non-collaborative environments can.

**General Discussion**

In this qualitative study, I focused on potential patterns and processes among FL teachers in two types of high schools
How do Foreign Language Teachers Maintain their Proficiency in the Italian context. This focus is consistent with assumptions of grounded methods used to infer a theory that "evolves from the study of a phenomenon situated in one particular situational context" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 174). The information I gathered and analyzed through the interviews presented an insightful glimpse into how a small group of high-school FL teachers maintain their TL proficiency.

In relation to the guiding research questions that investigated teachers’ experiences of and responses to self-perceived changes in proficiency, I developed a theoretical framework to illustrate some common trajectories (Figure 1). The flow chart shows that after university graduation some teachers (e.g., Lucy and Stephanie) went abroad, but came back eventually to teach at school like the rest of the group. They all experienced that teaching required different knowledge and use of the language according to the type of school at which they taught and sought professional development that could match their needs. Some teachers in vocational schools mentioned colleagues that perceived they did not need further development and whose proficiency probably did not improve over time. The teachers in the study all looked for development. However, while some (e.g., Lucy, Suzy, Tanya, and Betty) found groups and courses that matched their needs and allowed them to engage in development within a community, others (e.g., John, Stephanie, and Julie) did not find such a match and engaged in self-development activities. In either case, teachers who engaged in any type of professional development activities perceived their proficiency had improved.

In Figure 1, based on the possible development trajectories teachers experienced, it is evident that regardless of teachers’ proficiency at graduation, FL teaching inherently changes teachers’ knowledge of and about the TL. The different school environments inform the changes, and this can lead to a plateauing of (or decrease in) proficiency or development, according to the discrepancies between teachers’ actual and possible future selves (Kubanyiova, 2009). In other words, if teachers perceive the context as a challenge and also perceive their actual L2 teacher’s self as not adequate for it, this discrepancy may trigger the search for activities to reach their possible L2 teacher’s self (ideal, ought-to or feared). It is noteworthy that the same context can affect teachers’ choice to engage in development in opposite ways (e.g., John and his colleagues). Teachers’ possible selves are derived from social comparisons (e.g., White & Ding, 2009), and the complex dynamics between individual teachers’ ideal selves and their ought-to selves constructed in the social context can have opposite outcomes of commitment in professional development or lack thereof.

Any change in proficiency can be perceived as a holistic form of growth when the development matches teachers’ possible selves (their needs or the needs of their school environments). Teachers thus look
How do Foreign Language Teachers Maintain their Proficiency

Figure 1. A proposed grounded theory of FL teachers’ engagement in maintaining proficiency.

for and engage in TL development activities informed by the needs of their school environment. As a further step, once teachers decide to engage in professional development, it is important that there is the possibility of undertaking it in a collaborative community. Thus, the issue is not only about what to do, but also how to do it. Interview data (e.g., Lucy and Suzy) showed that teachers’ development groups and courses are not just opportunities to access resources; rather, they afford opportunities to share these resources in a constructive environment. Foreign languages exist only as expressions of a community as they are a means of communication among individuals used to express feelings, share experiences, and negotiate opinions and points of view. Thus, sharing resources, experiences, and collaborating with colleagues contribute to the communicative and interactive processes
that make learning and teaching languages real, effective, practical and ultimately pleasant (e.g. Lucy, Betty and Tanya). However, when no collaborative community is found, development can still be pursued individually (e.g. John), if the primary drive is to realize one’s ideal self.

The theoretical framework of FL teachers’ engagement in TL development put forward in this paper shows that teachers face two main challenges when they choose to engage: (1) the influence of the pedagogical context in activating possible self-guides, and (2) finding a sharing and collaborative community. The specific school context in particular shapes teachers’ needs and may or may not drive them toward looking for development depending on the emotional dissonance between their actual and possible selves. Then, when looking for development, teachers may find a sharing and collaborative community that constructively helps them to reduce the actual-versus-possible-self gap, or they might not find it and make the hard decision to pursue development by themselves.

These findings have implications for designing in-service professional development courses with a bottom-up approach that addresses the two key decision-making moments teachers face: 1) deciding to engage in professional development activities; and 2) maintaining their engagement in professional development activities with or without a supportive community. Activating possible balanced self-guides is crucial and helps determine teacher engagement. In order for the motivation to maintain proficiency to be transformed into action, both individual factors (e.g., possible selves) and contextual factors need to interact in a mutually reinforcing manner.

In light of these findings, pre- and in-service development should work on raising teachers’ awareness about their possible selves (personal goals, perceived obligations and responsibilities, and feared consequences) and on balancing them. Empirical studies (e.g., Hock, Deshler, & Schumaker, 2006; Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006) designed activities for language learners to activate and sustain the vision of the plausible ideal L2 self by means of creative ideal-self-generating activities, methods of imagery enhancement and reflexivity in order to create concrete pathways. Such methods are based on the idea that promoting certain conditions (e.g., a vivid future self image, perceived plausibility of ideal self, harmony between ideal and ought-to self, priming, and accompanying procedural strategies) enhances the motivational impact of the ideal and ought-to selves. Thus, activities that raise learners’ awareness of their abilities and skills have been used to create visions of their ideal self (e.g., a possible self tree with branches and other elements representing both desires and fears). Other activities, such as guided imagery, have been used to strengthen learners’ vision. Such methods could be adapted and applied to encourage pre- and in-service FL teachers to activate plausible and sustainable L2 selves where goals and action plans are possible and desirable. Balancing L2 possible selves is also crucial, as shown in Kubanyiova’s (2009) study. It is important to note that when the goals of teacher
development courses do not match the intrinsic or extrinsic aspirations of teachers, or when a teacher’s ought-to self is overemphasized, no intervention, change, or development can occur. Ushioda and Dörnyei (2012) argued that “self-perceptions are socially grounded [and]… emerge in a continuous interaction with the social environment” (p. 354). Because L2 possible selves have a cumulative strength and work better when their promoting and preventing properties interact toward the same goal, it is crucial to also work at the school contextual level, so that the internalization of external influences is harmonized with the ideal self.

What was missing for some teachers in this study was a sense of community and a supportive network that could accompany them in the life-long journey of maintaining their proficiency. Findings suggest a need to take into account Horwitz’s (1996) call for a supportive and nonjudgmental network of colleagues to alleviate teachers’ feelings of FL anxiety. By means of a careful bottom-up analysis of the specific needs of different school environments, FL teachers’ organizations should work toward promoting primarily a sharing environment for teachers to engage in meaningful development activities that match teachers’ internalized (ideal and ought-to selves) goals.

The proposed theoretical framework about teachers’ trajectories in maintaining proficiency is based on data from a small group of teachers, who were self-selected and belonged to two out of the three types of high schools in Italy. In this way, I chose to pursue depth rather than breadth in this paper. Nevertheless, further data should be collected from teachers in technical schools in order to have a broader picture of teachers’ needs and challenges in the three different school environments. Moreover, in keeping with qualitative research practice (Friedman, 2012; Creswell, 2013), interview data should be triangulated with classroom observations for a better understanding of how the proficiency-teaching relationship described by the teachers is reflected in their classrooms. Another crucial piece of information could be provided by data from professional development courses (by examining their topics, aims, frequency and evaluations). Triangulating such data with data concerning teachers’ needs and beliefs could help identify and bridge the main perceived and actual gaps in FL teachers’ professional development. Finally, although some similarities exist in high school contexts across countries, this qualitative study is situated in the Italian context. Data from FL teachers from other countries could enable us to paint a better picture of how FL teachers navigate the life-long experience of learning and maintaining a foreign language.


How do Foreign Language Teachers Maintain their Proficiency


Appendix

Questions for the semi-structured interview

1. What constitutes foreign language proficiency for you?

2. What is your experience as a learner of the target language? (in terms of years, institutions, outside classroom activities, motivations etc..)

3. What were your goals as a learner?

4. What is your experience as a teacher of the target language?

5. What are your goals as a foreign language teacher?

6. How important is it for you to achieve target language proficiency? And for your job? For your institution? And for your students?

7. How much effort are you willing to put into pursuing the maintenance of your language proficiency?

8. What activities do you think are useful/available to maintain your proficiency?

9. Do you think your proficiency is affected by teaching? If yes, how?

10. Do you think teaching affects/ed your proficiency? If yes, how?

11. In your opinion, what are the main challenges in teaching a foreign language?
Marked Theme in the Reading Comprehension of Advanced L2 English Learners

David Martínez-Prieto
MA TESOL Program
Michigan State University
mart1498@msu.edu

Introduction: Yesterday I saw him

According to Barzegar (2013), the way we arrange words in different positions of the clause is essential to communicate in any language. In other words, word order is highly important when creating meaning. Second language learners usually aim to have a clear understanding of how and where to place words, so they can achieve successful communication in the target language. Kessler (2004) found that native speakers and advanced language learners of English have a similar level of syntactical knowledge, especially in terms of word order. However, this word-order knowledge does not seem equally applied to different structures and languages. In this regard, Jin (2008) discovered that English speakers have much difficulty in learning marked structures in Chinese. Similarly, Solís Hernández (2006) demonstrated that L2 English learners usually struggle with structures that do not follow the same pattern at all times, especially in relation to adverb placement. She described that most students did not clearly understand the reasons why adverbs in English are placed in different positions of the clause. In my experience, I have noticed that small differences in clause constructions (e.g., “I saw him yesterday” and “Yesterday I saw him”), can be confusing to L2 learners. This is not only because of the syntactic order, but because sometimes it is difficult for learners to understand the reasons that have motivated a speaker or a writer to select a less common word order construction to communicate a specific message.

Thus, I believe that understanding why native speakers choose to create meaning by producing clauses with less usual patterns can help L2 learners develop better discourse competence. Usó and Martínez Flor (2006) noted that discourse competence concerns all four types of communicative competence: linguistic competence (the ability to construct basic linguistic elements for communication, such as morphological patterns or lexical sources), pragmatic competence (competence to use language appropriately in certain contexts), intercultural competence (understanding of how to interpret oral or written texts in a determined sociocultural situation), and strategic competence (knowing how to continue with the flow of information when breakdowns occur). Accordingly, comprehending why native speakers choose to use constructions with a less usual word order can help language learners
understand and produce the L2 in a more accurate way.

This research will focus on describing situations in which native English speakers prefer to create meaning using unusual word order constructions, specifically in asynchronous communication. Because this research analyzes the writing-reading process of meaning creation, I decided to take a systematic functional approach based on the notions by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) that deal with the text organization. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), language is a goal oriented-activity that can be described in terms of three semantic components, or metafunctions: interpersonal, ideational, and textual. In this study, I mainly focus on the textual metafunction of language that deals with the choices of discourse organization in written and oral modalities (i.e., how language is used in the written discourse vs. an oral interaction), and, more specifically, I look into the conception of “theme” as a point of departure of a clause. In short, this research will examine why some linguistic elements are selected in a clause and how they are comprehended, and the implications of this unusual word order in the reading comprehension of L2 learners.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Functional Grammar and Metafunctions**

According to Butt et al. (2000), the ultimate goal of language learning is the production and recognition of the meaning. Therefore, given that language is a goal-oriented activity, language learners must be aware of the three factors described by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) when producing and recognizing the meaning of utterances: These factors are tenor (the relationship between interlocutors), field (what is going on in the interaction? where is it taking place? when?), and mode (the way language is being used to accomplish a purpose). Based on these three factors, Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) proposed the three metafunctions that deal with how language is integrated to formulate messages. These metafunctions are the interpersonal metafunction (i.e., questions vs. commands), the ideational metafunction (i.e., which verbs are preferred over others in certain situations) and the textual metafunction (i.e., a written text vs. an oral interaction). It is important to note that, according to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), these three metafunctions interact simultaneously whenever language is used.

**Theme and Rheme**

Along with the idea that the textual metafunction concerns how people organize their messages, Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) proposed two elements to describe this metafunction: theme and rheme. Theme is regarded as what comes first in the clause; in other words, theme is the “point of departure” of a clause. This initial position, according to the Hallidayan linguistic approach, gives theme a special status since it provides information about the way people, consciously or unconsciously, construct meaning: Theme usually emphasizes what people consider most important in the message. Rheme, on the other hand, is whatever comes after
theme. For example, in the sentence, I love you, theme is I, and rheme is love you.

Theme can be classified into textual, interpersonal, and topical themes (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Textual theme is related to words that join clauses, such as continuatives (e.g., yes, no, well, now), conjunctions (e.g., and, because), conjunctive adjuncts (e.g., in addition), and wh-relatives (e.g., who, where). Interpersonal theme is mainly related to the words that indicate the relationship between participants and the text, such as vocatives and modal adjuncts (e.g., in my opinion, fortunately, surprisingly). Topical theme is the main theme since it is considered to be the first word (or words) to carry meaning. This word can be a participant, a circumstance or a process.

Table 1. Types of Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>And, my old friend, I love you</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Textual, Interpersonal, Topical, Rheme</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is also important to note that, based on the Hallidayan ideas of theme and rheme, other researchers have suggested a wider perspective of this former component. First, Lóres Sanz (2000) depicted theme as the way the writer or reader is trying to “manipulate” the reaction of the receiver of the message towards a particular perspective. For example, theme can be controlled to mitigate the force of news that can be displeasing to the receiver. As for this, she suggested that theme does not only influence the textual metafunction, but also the interpersonal one. Similarly, Meyer (2010) stated that theme has two main functions that occur simultaneously: it “grounds” the ideas of a speaker or a writer into language, and it also provides a reader or a listener with the orientation about the information to be received. In addition, Hasselgard (2004) noted that the selection of theme helps to build cohesion. That is, he found that themes work together with other elements in the discourse.

Recent studies related to L2 learning and Theme

Although distinguishing boundaries between theme and rheme is certainly difficult, many studies have addressed how this distinction can be beneficial for L2 learning. Wong (2007) conducted a longitudinal case study for six months. In this study, an advanced English learner (IELTS 6.5) who had completed 11 years of English learning was asked to write 48 essays. Wong analyzed these essays based on the distinction of theme and rheme, and found that some of the most common errors were related to the absence of theme in clauses such as “Actually, rather than saying to help the community, not to say that help the domestic people,” a vague theme as in the case of “Secondly, the comfortable lifestyle since motor vehicles have been invented years ago, the convenient transportation changes people,” and an incoherent tie between theme and rheme like in: “…this custom has been practiced throughout the western communities, people’s daily life even in the marriage” (pp. 4-5). Furthermore, this study adopted an action-research approach to improve this student’s writing. The student was explicitly taught the concepts of theme and rheme, and was then asked to write and
correct his essays based on theme and rheme. The researcher reported that this process was tedious and time consuming, but participant’s writing skills improved drastically.

Rustipa (2011) qualitatively analyzed the writing samples of 15 Indonesians who were taking a course of paragraph-based English writing. Their proficiency level was not reported. After analyzing the texts collected during one semester, Rustipa (2011) found that most students used the same theme repetitively during their compositions. They also employed a theme zigzag pattern in which they alternated theme and rheme that were commonly used together. Students rarely wrote in a multiple-theme pattern in which themes and rhemes are mixed together. The results showed that students preferred to use the former two patterns because they were the easiest ones to follow. Therefore, Rustipa (2011) suggested that L2 educators need to expose learners to texts full of a multiple-theme pattern so that they can enrich their writing compositions in the L2.

**Marked Theme**

According to the functional grammar approach (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), themes can also occur in unusual constructions. These unusual constructions occur because a speaker or a writer found a good reason to start a clause that way (e.g., to emphasize meaning to influence the perspective of person who receives the message). Similarly, Flowerdew (2013) suggested that these constructions demonstrate that a speaker or a writer wants to strongly emphasize the information that has been previously said or written. Thus, the Hallidayan linguistic tradition names these kinds of themes as “marked”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Marked Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Many years ago I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Marked Theme | Rheme |

Besides meaning emphasis, Qi (2012) proposed that marked theme can be used to accomplish textual and stylistic functions. Also, she stated that marked theme structures can serve “the effects of natural cohesion, symmetrical structure and sequential information flow” (p. 200), and that marked theme can set the setting of a specific situation in the discourse, summarize and contrast information in a more explicit way, and lastly achieve aesthetic purposes.

**Marked Theme and Second Language Research**

Some studies have addressed the importance of marked theme in L2 learning. In particular, there is one study that observed the relationship between L2 learning and marked theme (Green, Christopher, Lam, & Mei, 2000). Regarding the tendency of Chinese learners to formulate inappropriate marked themes in writing (e.g., “Concerning the assignment, it was very demanding for most of us”), Green et al. (2000) looked for the occurrences of concerning and for in the thematic position, and connectors (e.g., moreover, furthermore, and besides) in the writing samples of native English speakers and Chinese learners of English. In order to
say that a connector was appropriately used in the thematic position, the connector should be used to “introduce a new topical referent or recall a referent with a relatively remote antecedent” (Green et al., 2000, p. 105). The results indicated that NS and NNS samples have big differences in terms of the way marked themes were used. As hypothesized, NNS tended to inappropriately overuse front devices as marked theme items.

Ebrahimi and Ebrahimi (2012) also explored theme markedness. In this study, researchers examined how frequently marked themes are used by L2 learners in their academic compositions. They analyzed the writing samples of 60 university students majoring in TESOL, and divided the students into three groups regarding the time they had been exposed to academic English writing: sophomores (20), juniors (20) and seniors (20). Then participants were asked to narrate three pictorial stories in writing. The students were given 45 minutes for the narrative writing task of each story, and their texts were analyzed using T-units analysis. After performing a chi-square analysis, researchers found that participants’ use of marked theme increased gradually with the time they were exposed to academic writing (sophomore group = 9.05%, junior group = 9.10%, and senior group = 9.90%). With these findings, the researchers recommended that language teachers promote the use of marked themes in writing, because marked themes can help students produce better L2 writing, especially in terms of rhetorical structure.

In sum, although the current L2 literature on theme use provides some techniques to improve writing skills, little attention has been paid to the concept of theme and L2 reading comprehension. More specifically, the relationship between comprehension of marked theme and meaning creation just started to accept the Hallidayan idea that native English speakers produce and understand linguistic items in relation to meaning emphasis, text cohesion, and aesthetic reasons. In this regard, it seems that the functions of marked theme are accepted with a mere assumption that Hallidayan concepts are true, without any empirical evidence. For language teachers, understanding the practical reasons why native speakers choose a specific theme construction can be beneficial to promote a more accurate comprehension and production of L2 learners.

**Research questions**

1) How do native speakers and advanced learners of English understand marked theme clauses when these occur in texts in terms of meaning?

2) What importance do native speakers and advanced learners of English grant to word order in terms of meaning in written English clauses?

3) What kind of marked clauses, if any, are the ones that native and advanced English learners recognize as meaning-markers in texts?

**Hypothesis**

Based on the assumptions of Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) and
Flowerdew (2013), I expect that native English speakers recognize marked themes as meaning emphasisers. In addition, because Ebrahimi and Ebrahimi (2012) suggested that L2 learners would become more familiar with marked them use with greater exposure to the L2, I expect that advanced learners of English are also able to recognize marked themes as meaning emphasisers. Also, based on the studies of Hasselgard (2004) and Qi (2012), I expect that both groups will identify the use of marked themes aimed to achieve coherence, aesthetics, and cohesion in the text. Finally, drawing on the theme descriptions of Lorés Sanz (2000) and Meyer (2010), I hypothesize that a few participants will mention marked theme can draw the attention of a reader towards a particular perspective.

Participants
Participants of this research will be divided into two groups: native speakers and advanced English learners. Both groups will be graduate students studying in the United States at the moment of the research. I expect that the number of participants in both groups will be equal, five participants in each group. Nonnative speaking participants will be required to have the TOEFL iBT score of 100 or its equivalent before participation.

Instruments
A text taken from Wikipedia will be used for this research. The text is a short biography of Mohammad Ali. First, I will give students a biography of Mohammad Ali in which some clauses are deleted. Participants will then be asked to select unmarked and marked themes to fill the gaps. Also, participants will be asked to justify why they decided to use the marked or unmarked themes to fill the gaps (see Appendix A). Subsequently, participants will be interviewed by the researcher to obtain a deeper insight into theme use (see Appendix B).

Data collection procedures
I will collect data for this research in one day. Both groups will be asked to answer instrument 1 (Appendix A) individually for 15 minutes, followed by a 5-minute break. Then I will interview the participants individually. These face-to-face interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Data from instrument 1 and interviews will be analyzed qualitatively using a content analysis approach. That is, I will initially look for some patterns in participants’ answers to set general categories of theme or marked theme choices. Then I will compare individual answers to the general theme/marked theme categories in an attempt to refine the initial categorization. Finally, I will verify that the theme/marked theme categories fit to participants’ answers.

Expected results
I expect that both groups (native speakers and advanced learners) are able to support the Hallidayan notion of marked theme that the use of marked themes is intended to emphasize meaning. While I believe that both groups will provide support for this hypothesis, I postulate that advanced English learners will give more
consistent answers since they may have learned language structures in a more explicit way. In addition, I expect that both groups will also support the theme descriptions of Hasselgard (2004) and Qi (2012) that theme choice contributes to text cohesion, coherence, and flow of information. Also, I expect that some of the both groups will also mention that marked themes contribute to the relationship between information and receiver orientation proposed by Lorés Sanz (2000) and Meyer (2010). Finally, based on Qi (2012) proposals, I expect that some of the both groups will identify the use of marked theme structures for aesthetic purposes.

**Expected limitations**

One of the limitations I find in this proposal is the number of participants (10 in total), for which the findings of this research would not be considered generalizable. In addition, the fact that the participants are graduate students in applied linguistics may influence the results of this research: participants may have developed a deeper language sensitivity compared to other people.

Another limitation concerns the design of the instruments. The set of clauses that show marked themes were explicitly modified for this research, which may reduce the ecological validity of this study. In addition, the interpretation of the questionnaires and interviews will be subjective, and the results of the research may represent a biased perspective of the researcher.

**References**


Usó-Juan, E., & Martínez Flor, A. (2006). Approaches to language learning and teaching: Towards acquiring communicative competence through the four skills. In E. Usó-Juan and A. Martínez-Flor (Eds.), *Current trends in the development and teaching of the four language skills* (pp. 3-26). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.


Marked Theme in the Reading Comprehension
Appendix A

Read the text below. It is the biography of the boxer Muhammad Ali. There are some gaps in the article. On the next page, you have two options to fill each gap. Please select which one would fit better and explain why. Note that the 3 paragraphs are part of the biography.

Mohammad Ali

1. _____________________________________________________________. He was an American former professional boxer, generally considered among the greatest heavyweights in the sport's history. A controversial and even polarizing figure during his early career, Ali is today widely regarded not only for the skills he displayed in the ring but for the values he exemplified outside of it: religious freedom, racial justice and the triumph of principle over expedience. He is one of the most recognized sports figures of the past 100 years, crowned "Sportsman of the Century" by *Sports Illustrated* and "Sports Personality of the Century" by the BBC.

2. _____________________________________________________________________. Shortly after that bout, Ali joined the Nation of Islam and changed his name (he was originally born as Cassius Clay).

4. ________________________________________________________________________. He was eventually arrested and found guilty on draft evasion charges and stripped of his boxing title. He did not fight again for nearly four years—losing a time of peak performance in an athlete's career. 5. ___________________________________________. Ali's personal courage as a conscientious objector to the war made him an icon for the larger counterculture generation. Ali would go on to become the first and only three-time lineal World Heavyweight Champion.

1) a) Muhammad Ali was born in January 17, 1942
b) It was in January 17, 1942 that Muhammad Ali was born.

Which sentence would you choose? Why?

______________________________________________________________________________

2) a) Ali won the world heavyweight championship in 1964 from Sonny Liston in a stunning upset.
b) In 1964, Ali won the world heavyweight championship from Sonny Liston in a stunning upset.

Which sentence would you choose? Why?

______________________________________________________________________________

3) a) He converted to Sunni Islam in 1975.
b) In 1975, he converted to Sunni Islam.

Which sentence would you choose? Why?
4) a) Ali refused to be conscripted into the U.S. military, citing his religious beliefs and opposition to the Vietnam War, in 1967, three years after winning the heavyweight title.

b) In 1967, three years after winning the heavyweight title, Ali refused to be conscripted into the U.S. military, citing his religious beliefs and opposition to the Vietnam War.

Which sentence would you choose? Why?

5) a) It was in 1974 when Ali’s conviction was overturned.

b) Ali’s conviction was overturned in 1974.

Which sentence would you choose? Why?

Appendix B

Interview

1) Do you think that word order is important in English? Why?

2) Do you believe that placing information (i.e., years or specific dates) at the beginning of the sentences changes the meaning of the sentence? Why?

3) In which situation would you place information such as years or times at the beginning of a sentence (i.e., In 1993, I went to Paris.)?

4) Do you think there’s any difference in the meaning of sentences like “Yesterday, I met you” and “It was yesterday when I met you”? 
Attention, Perception, and Production of the English Voiceless Interdental Fricative by Chinese Learners of English

Lianye Zhu
MA TESOL Program
Michigan State University
zhuliany@msu.edu

Introduction

For most English learners, a foreign accent has always been a difficulty that they cannot easily overcome. Numerous research studies have examined the reasons for this issue, and have attempted to help learners produce spoken English close to native speakers, if not possible to completely eliminate foreign accents. Among the difficulties learners encounter in acquiring native-like second language (L2) pronunciation, the voiceless interdental fricative (i.e., [θ]) has been considered one of the most difficult sounds to acquire by most English learners. Many studies have identified various substitutions for [θ] in the speaking production of learners with different first language (L1) backgrounds. For example, Rau, Chang, and Tarone (2009) reported that Thai, Russian, and Hungarian learners of English tended to substitute [t] for [θ], while [θ] was usually replaced with [s] by speakers from Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, and China (Lee & Cho, 2002; Rau et al., 2009). In order to explore possible causes of these problematic performances, one plausible way is to seek the relation between learners’ perception and production because it is generally believed that there is a positive correlation between a speaker’s perception and production; accordingly, improvement in one part will facilitate the development of the other. However, perception alone by no means determines production. Yang (1997) indicated that speakers’ attention, an important factor involved in one’s cognitive process of a speaking activity, also influences speaker’s perception and production. The following literature review introduces relevant theories and studies that have contributed to this research topic.

Inaccurate [θ] Sound Produced by Chinese Learners of English

Numerous studies have observed some problematic phonetic substitutions in the voiceless interdental fricatives produced by Chinese learners of English, showing that this phoneme is mostly replaced with [f], [s], or [t]. For example, Deterding (2006) analyzed the
pronunciation of 13 young Mandarin Chinese speakers by recording their passage reading and short interviews. He determined that [θ] was mostly replaced by [s], which confirmed the results of Hung’s (2005) study. Similar substitution errors were also found by Cheng and He (2008) and Chen and Bi (2008). The value of these two studies lies in their research methods. Cheng and He (2008) developed a four-year longitudinal study into the English pronunciation of 14 English major university students in mainland China to observe how participants’ English pronunciation improved. Instead of relying on native English speakers’ (NSs) judgment, the correctness of participants’ pronunciation was acoustically analyzed via PRAAT, an articulation analysis software in which inaccurate pronunciations were further analyzed through the comparison of phonetic parameters between sounds produced by participants and NSs. Instead of recording participants’ speaking output, Chen and Bi (2008) analyzed a spoken English corpus consisting of speech samples by 200 Chinese university students (50 English major students and 150 non-English major students). I predict that their results are quite generalizable due to their use of huge data collected from a fairly controlled group of participants.

However, regardless of the different research methods applied in these studies, they shared one limitation—the researchers attributed the difficulty of acquiring the target [θ] sound to the difference between the L1 (i.e., Chinese) and the L2 (i.e., English). They claimed that the lack of the equivalence of [θ] in Chinese led to Chinese speakers’ inaccurate production of that sound (Gao, 2002; Wu, 2008). Drawing narrowly on the findings related to contrastive analysis, researchers might have overlooked other valuable findings and other plausible factors. For example, Rau and Chang (2009) discovered that Chinese speakers performed differently under different circumstances. Specifically, the accuracy rate of the interdental fricative was higher in formal speaking than in casual speaking. Such findings of interlanguage (IL) variation could not be completely explained by contrastive analysis. In order to compensate for its limitation, interlanguage variation, which could be traced back to speaking style (Labov, 1966) and Optimality Theory (OT) (Prince & Smolensky, 1993), has received increasing attention in the field of second language acquisition (SLA).

Interlanguage Variation

Interlanguage variation has been studied from two perspectives: OT and speaking style shifting. OT, proposed by Prince and Smolensky (1993), is constraint-based and output-oriented (Hsu, 2013). Specifically, it states that the phonological output is the speakers’ optimal choice out of all the potential candidates with markedness and faithfulness being concerned. Advocates of an OT model proposed that learners with
different L1 backgrounds produced English interdental fricatives differently because their optimal choice of target sounds (i.e., interlanguage) was influenced by their constraint rankings of the L1. Besides, such output is variable because learners would gradually re-rank their linguistic constraints, which would eventually be the same as the constraints on the L2 (Lee, 2006; Lombardi, 2003; Wester, 2007; Yildiz, 2002). The detailed research of the OT model is beyond the scope of this study because the emphasis will be placed on speaking style shifting.

"Speaking style" was first analyzed by Labov (1966), and has been extensively studied both in L1 and L2 acquisition. Later with the increasing interest in IL, speaking style was believed to significantly influence learners’ IL (Dickerson & Dickerson, 1977) as well. In general, style shifting is caused by the change of speakers' attention paid to speaking (Labov, 1966, 1970). Based on this principle, Tarone (1982, 1983, 1988) drew a continuum of style shifting with vernacular speaking and careful speaking at each pole respectively, and proposed that the more vernacular speech was, the less accurate it would be. However, Labov and Tarone’s theory about “style shifting” was challenged by Dowd, Zuengler, and Berkowitz (1990) and Major (2001) because it was hard to determine the boundary between two adjacent speaking styles. In other words, it was not clear how many different variables two speech samples should have so that they can be identified as two different speaking styles. In addition, even Tarone (1979) admitted that it was challenging to observe “real vernacular speaking” to which speakers paid very limited attention, because of the presence of researchers, the speakers’ awareness of research participation, and the application of sound recorders.

To specify the definition of style shifting, some researchers proposed that it is the amount of attention paid to speaking that determines the accuracy of speaking (Ellis, 1994; J. Hulstijn & W. Hulstijn, 1984; Major, 2001). Variationists proposed that the more formal the speaking style is, the more attention would be allocated to pronunciation, and therefore the more accurate the pronunciation would be (Dowd et al., 1990; Major, 2001). Commonly, the formality of four speaking styles was studied. From the most formal to the least formal, they were: word-list reading, paragraph reading, picture describing, and free talking or interviewing (Thompson & Brown, 2012). The English interdental fricative, because of its variation, has always been a popular target sound in the study of the relationship between the formality of speaking and its variation. For example, Schmidt (1977) investigated the English interdental fricatives produced by Egyptian Arabic speakers and discovered that participants were more likely to produce [θ] in more formal speaking. Similarly, Coyne (2008) studied the English interdental fricatives in word list reading and paragraph reading produced
by Cajun people whose L1 was French, and discovered that the participants substituted [t] for [θ] less often in the word list reading task. Therefore, Coyne concluded that higher formality might lead to higher accuracy of speaking production. However, such a correlation between formality and production accuracy in Coyne’s study might not be generalizable because of two limitations. First, only four participants were involved in the study. Second, it is questionable if word list reading had a significantly higher level of formality than the paragraph reading task. Rau, Chang, and Tarone (2009) conducted a more generalizable study, in which they investigated 27 Chinese university students’ production of the [θ] sound under four circumstances with different levels of formality. Their results also indicated a positive correlation between the formality of the speaking and the accuracy of the target sound.

However, the negative evidence about correlation between accuracy and formality was also found in Thompson and Brown’s research (2012). This study observed the speaking production of a Spanish learner of English, and found that the participant pronounced most accurately not in reading minimal pairs but in reading passages. Coyne (2008) also discovered that one of her participants had the highest accuracy in the passage reading task. These unexpected findings indicated that the attention allocated to pronunciation may not necessarily be related to the form of speaking but other factors may also influence speakers’ pronunciation as well.

**Attention and Monitoring**

Monitoring during speaking is viewed as production-based (Kormos, 1999) because it functions as a “mental eye” through which speakers hold control of their utterance (Berg, 1986). Since the perceptual loop theory (Levelt, 1989,1993) posited that speaking production is parsed into three steps, namely, pre-articulation, articulation, and post-articulation, some researchers have claimed that speaking monitoring should also be studied in these three steps respectively (Kormos, 2000). The pre-articulatory monitoring has been studied by Baars, Motley, and Mackay (1975) and Motley, Camden, and Baars (1982). They believed that speakers would monitor the accuracy of their utterances before the speaking was articulated. This hypothesis led to a further assumption that inaccurate pronunciation was caused either by the lack of attention or by the failure of monitoring. The former involves the allocation of attention consciously or subconsciously controlled by speakers (de Bot, 1992) while the latter relates to self-perception errors.

Kormos (2000) reviewed the previous studies (e.g., Tarone, 1983; Tarone & Parrish, 1988), and summarized that the accuracy of speaker’s production was influenced by the amount of attention the speaker paid to it. In order to identify the amount of attention allocated to different aspects of speaking such as the
lexicon, semantics, and/or phonetics, she recruited 40 Hungarian learners of English to accomplish an information-gap role play and a retrospective interview afterwards. She regarded the instances of self-repair as the existence of attention. Her analysis showed that attention was paid first to the lexicon and then to grammar. She believed that such a priority hierarchy would be applied to all learners, irrespective of proficiency level. Although Kormos’ study did not take into account speakers’ attention to pronunciation, Wheeldon and Levelt (1995) explored this issue five years prior to Kormos.

Wheeldon and Levelt (1995) focused on how speakers monitored phonological encoding. They asked Dutch participants to silently translate the L2 English stimulated words they heard into their L1 Dutch, and during the translation, to press the button whenever they noticed that they encountered the target Dutch phoneme which they were required to monitor. A comparison between the participants’ response time when the target Dutch phoneme was in the word initial position with the response time when it was in other word positions showed that the participants monitored word initial phonemes significantly faster than other phonemes. Their findings illustrated that monitoring was influenced by word position of the target segment. This argument was supported by Rau et al. (2009)’s study in which Chinese learners of English monitored their words’ initial interdental fricative most effectively.

**Distraction**

Two predominant methods of studying participants’ internal attention are thinking aloud and stimulated recall. However, alternative research methods have been called for since it is impossible for participants to think aloud while speaking and the details from the stimulated recall might potentially be incomplete or incorrect due to limited short-term memory. Although we cannot precisely predict how much participants would pay attention to L2 data, it seems reasonable to assume that participants would pay less attention to L2 data if they are distracted by other tasks. Based on previous research, Zeamer and Fox Tree (2013) posited that auditory distraction would cost people extra cognitive effort and shift their attention from the focal task. Al-Hejin (2005) further noted the concepts of attention in SLA that the more demanding a task is, the more attention people need to pay to it. These studies implied that if distracted by another task, participants would pay less attention to the primary task. Because of the salient influence that distraction has on attention, it will be included in the study as an independent variable that may differentiate participants’ performance.

**Production and Perception**

Sometimes speakers may not be able to identify production errors, even though they are carefully monitoring their pronunciation. In other words, it is not the
lack of attention but the failure of self-perception that leads to inaccurate production. In fact, many researchers have studied the relation between perception and production. One popular belief is that perception influences production. For example, Brannen (2011) analyzed the perception and production of English interdental fricatives by participants from Japan, Russia, France, and Québec Canada (French speaker). He observed a relationship between participants’ perception and production of target sounds and posited that the improvement of perception could facilitate the development of production. Similarly, Fu (2011) discovered a positive relation between Taiwanese ESL learners’ production and perception of interdental fricatives.

However, opposite results were also found by other researchers. For example, Lee (2011) found no relation between a group of advanced Korean EFL learners’ perception and production of interdental fricatives. Also, both Syed (2013) and Owolabi (2012) found that learners only had difficulty in producing English interdental fricatives, but not in perceiving them.

Another issue in studying the relation between perception and production is that little attention has been paid to learners’ self-perception. In early research, usually it was assumed that learners’ ability to perceive their own production was the same as that to perceive the production of native speakers. Therefore, it might be worth exploring if there is any difference between these two types of perception. Taken together, the research questions of this study are:

1. What is the effect of speaking style on the production accuracy of [θ]?
2. What is the effect of word position on the production accuracy of [θ] in word list reading?
3. What is the effect of speaking style and word position on production accuracy of [θ]? Do they interact?
4. What is the effect of auditory distraction on accuracy of [θ] in word list production?
5. What is the effect of auditory distraction and word position on production accuracy of [θ]?
6. What factors attract learners’ attention to the production and perception of [θ]?
7. Is there a relationship between L2 learners’ speaking perception and production?
8. What is the effect of distraction on participants’ monitoring strategies?

Method

Participants

Twenty-five female Chinese graduate students and nine male Chinese graduate students participated in this study. All of them were enrolled at a large university in the United States, and their first language was Mandarin. When they participated in this study, their length of residence (LOR) in the United States ranged from six months to three years,
with a mean of 13.24 months (SD = 9.43 months). About two-thirds of the participants were engineering students who had comparatively limited opportunities to speak English with NSs.

Five NSs participated as raters. Four of them were ESL instructors at the university. Each had at least two years of ESL teaching experience. The fifth rater was a program coordinator who frequently communicated with international graduate students.

**Materials and Procedures**

Before asking the participants to complete the experiment tasks, the researcher asked a rater to read 15 groups of the minimal pairs with a total of 41 words for the perception test. The minimal pairs were adopted from Rau et al. (2009) and the [θ] sound was included in each pair. The voice was recorded on a SONY recording pen and was later edited by the software Gold Wave so that the volume was amplified while the noise was eliminated.

The experiment tasks had three phases: the production test, the perception test, and the interview. Each phase was further divided into several steps. First, the participants were asked to tell the story *The Three Little Pigs*, which was adopted from Rau et al. (2009)’s study, based on eight picture prompts. They were given one minute to plan the story, and were expected to include as much information as possible from the pictures in their stories.

Second, the participants were asked to listen to the recordings of their story telling and to recall whether they paid attention to [θ] while producing it. If they paid attention to the target [θ], they were also required to explain their strategies for monitoring the production accuracy of this sound. The stimulated recall was recorded using the recording pen.

Third, half of the participants were provided with a word list containing 37 words divided into fifteen groups of minimal pairs, all of which included the [θ] sound. This word list was adopted from Rau et al. (2009). A piece of Chinese news was also selected from a China Central Television (CCTV) News Report and edited using the Gold Wave to reduce the background noise. I chose The CCTV News Report because the reporter’s voice was clear and speaking rate was moderate. In addition, the language spoken by the reporter was standard Mandarin. The participants were asked to listen to this news report played in the headphones while reading aloud all the minimal pairs on the word list at a normal speed. They were asked to remember as many details of the news report as they could because immediately after they listened to the news, they were expected to repeat it to the digital recording pen.

Fourth, that group of the participants was told to read another 15 groups of minimal pairs, which included 44 words in total. Like the first word list, [θ] was also involved in each minimal pair. This time, no additional task was required.
The other half of the participants were required to go through the fourth step first and then the third step. Fifth, the participants were asked to complete a 12-item questionnaire. Half of the items addressed their overall attitude towards accented English spoken by Chinese learners of English, especially concerning [θ], and the other half concerned their attention paid to [θ] during story telling and word list reading. Sixth, the participants were required to listen to 15 groups of minimal pairs read by the fifth rater and to write down whatever words they heard. They were allowed to use IPA symbols, which was shown to them for reference, if they did not know how to spell the words. After that, they were asked to listen to another 30 groups of minimal pairs read by themselves during step three and step four. They were also required to write down the words they heard. In order to reduce the influence of participants’ memory for these minimal pairs, they were not told that they were listening to their own recordings.

Last, a one-to-one interview was conducted between the participant and the researcher in Chinese because it was the first language of the interviewer and the interviewee. All the participants’ speaking data were recorded using the recording pen and were stored on a private password-protected laptop for analysis. The procedures of the study are summarized into Table 1.

Table 1. The Procedures of the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Methods of Collecting Data</th>
<th>Materials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step One: Story telling</td>
<td>Recording</td>
<td>Story pictures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step Two: Stimulated recall</td>
<td>Recording</td>
<td>Recordings of Story telling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step Three: -Second word list reading (with auditory distraction)</td>
<td>Recording</td>
<td>Second word list, headphones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-News retelling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step Four: First word list reading (without auditory distraction)</td>
<td>Recording</td>
<td>First word list</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step Five: Questionnaire</td>
<td>Writing down answers</td>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step Six: other-perception, self-perception</td>
<td>Writing down the words perceived</td>
<td>Recordings of the word list reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step Seven: Interview</td>
<td>Recording</td>
<td>Interview questions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Analysis

In order to answer the research questions, both quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed. The first step in the quantitative data analysis was the evaluation of the participants’ production and perception. Four ELC teaching assistants, English NSs, were assigned to evaluate the participants’ speaking output. Each rater was responsible for evaluating 17 participants’ use of [θ] in their story telling and word list reading. The rating arrangement was carefully designed so that each participant could be rated by two raters. Table 2 illustrates how each rater was assigned to evaluate the participants’ perception tests. Each discrepancy was counted as one perception error and the percentages of inaccuracy were calculated through dividing the number of erroneous words by the total number of the words.

Table 2. The Rating Arrangement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Raters</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rater 1</td>
<td>1<del>10 18</del>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rater 2</td>
<td>1<del>10 11</del>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rater 3</td>
<td>11<del>17 25</del>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rater 4</td>
<td>18<del>24 25</del>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the ratings provided by the raters, the researcher further categorized the erroneous words, which were either produced or perceived incorrectly, into three groups according to where the [θ] was positioned in the word: initial, medial, or final. For each group, the percentage of erroneous words was also calculated. In addition, the researcher transcribed the data from interviews and assigned to the participants stimulated recalls for a qualitative analysis.

Anticipated Results

The pilot study showed that participants performed the best in the word list reading without the distraction of the news while the worst in the story telling. Also they paid more attention to the production of [θ] in word list reading than they did in story telling. This pilot study yields following anticipated results. First, participants will have a higher accuracy of voiceless interdental fricative in word-list reading than in story telling because they would be
able to pay more attention to pronunciation while reading the word list. Second, in terms of the position of erroneous [0] sounds, it is expected that participants will make the fewest errors in producing the [0] in the word-initial position. Third, although not tested in the pilot study, it is still very likely that participants who are not required to listen to the news report will perform better than those asked to listen to the news report while reading the word list. Fourth, the amount of attention paid to the production of target sounds may have a negative correlation with the percentage of errors. Fifth, a positive correlation might be found between participants’ production and perception.

The limitations of this study will be weak generalizability because of the small sample of participants. Also it would be better if each participant was required to do a stimulated recall.

Nevertheless, this study will have pedagogical implications for SLA. First, instructing learners to strategically allocate more attention to the phones that are most likely to be pronounced incorrectly might help learners to improve their overall pronunciation. Second, instructors are recommended to identify the reason that leads to learners’ incorrect pronunciation before designing the methods of instruction. The possible difficulties indicated from this study are: a) knowing what the correct pronunciation should be; b) failing to self-monitor the speech production; and c) not knowing how to produce the target sound.

This study lays the foundation for future research about the relation between speakers’ working memory and their accurate pronunciation. Because the accuracy of pronunciation is significantly determined by the amount of monitoring (i.e., attention) allocated to it as expected to be shown in this study and because monitoring is influenced by available total attentional resources, which is closely related to speaker’s working memory capacity (Broadbent, 1958; Gathercole & Baddeley, 1994; Robinson, 1995), it is hypothesized that learners’ working memory capacity plays the role in their L2 speech pronunciation, as evidenced by Reis, Kluge, and Bettoni-techio, (2007) and O’Brien, Segalowitz, Freed, and Collentine, (2007).


Attention, Awareness, and Noticing in SLA: A Methodological Review

Jieun Irene Ahn
Second Language Studies Program
Michigan State University
ahnjieun@msu.edu

Introduction

Schmidt’s Noticing Hypothesis (1990, 1994, 1995, 2001), which proposes that the process of noticing enables the conversion of input to intake, has been hugely influential and is now “regarded as a mainstream SLA construct” (Yoshioka, Frota, & Bergsleithner, 2013, p. 7). Early studies on noticing mainly involved the issue of whether attention or awareness—and what types—were necessary for L2 learning (Gass, 1997; Leow, 1997, 2000; Robinson, 1995; Schmidt, 1990; Tomlin & Vila, 1994). However, researchers have begun to note that it is important to ascertain how to operationalize and measure noticing for empirical testing (Philp, 2012). Given that L2 learners’ internal cognitive activities are neither directly measureable nor observable, the difficulty we face in measuring noticing is not surprising.

Moreover, “the terms noticing, attention, and awareness have lacked in precision” (Gass, Behney, & Plonsky, 2013, p. 266) across studies, resulting in inconsistencies in the measures of noticing.

To gain access to learners’ cognitive processes of noticing, online/concurrent measures (e.g., think-alouds, underlining) and off-line/non-concurrent measures (e.g., post-task questionnaires, pretest-posttest, stimulated recall) have been widely used in SLA. Additionally, eye-tracking has arisen recently as a more sophisticated methodology to measure the construct of noticing, shedding a new light on the issue. Because each measure has its own advantages and disadvantages, it is likely that the selection of a measure will inevitably influence the research results to a great extent. To better understand the relationship between noticing and SLA, it is paramount that “we have an adequate measure of what learners notice and when” (Smith, 2012, p. 53). In this regard, I would like to explore the roles of attention, awareness, and noticing in SLA from a methodological point of view, especially by examining what measurements have been used to gauge these psycholinguistic elements of noticing in various research contexts.

Critical Review of the Research

Theoretical Debate on the Noticing Hypothesis

In response to Krashen (1981)’s claim that only subconscious processes can guarantee successful L2 acquisition, Schmidt (1990) originally proposed the importance of the conscious mode of learning, evaluating noticing as a necessary...
and sufficient condition for L2 learning. According to his hypothesis, learners should have awareness at the point of learning, and their focal attention will lead to the input of new linguistic features in the memory system for further processing (Schmidt, 1995). After a decade, Schmidt came to view noticing as a facilitator of L2 development (Schmidt, 2001) and emphasized the role of attention in adult SLA. In this vein, the roles of attention and awareness during the early stage of language processing were highly underscored in the Noticing Hypothesis. With regard to this theoretical model, two controversial issues have been raised that are tightly linked to the measurement problem. First, the level of awareness is difficult to specify when admitting the fact that awareness cannot always be verbalized. From Schmidt’s perspective, for learning to occur, attention and a low level of awareness (i.e., noticing), “conscious registration of the concurrence of some event” (Schmidt, 1995, p. 29) are necessary, but high level awareness (i.e., understanding), “recognition of a general principle, rule, or pattern” (Schmidt, 1995, p. 29), is not required. However, as Truscott and Sharwood Smith (2011) suggested, it seems that noticing and understanding are almost impossible to “operationalize in any nonarbitrary way” (p. 37). Second, Schmidt (1995) viewed the two psychological constructs—attention and awareness—as isomorphic. What is neglected in this claim is that “attention and awareness can be dissociated” (Williams, 2013, p. 51). If we treat attention and awareness at the identical level, we come to face conceptual as well as methodological challenges since attention is a continuous variable whereas awareness is a dichotomous variable in research design. This discrepancy can then bring about a “mapping problem” (Godfroid, Boers, & Housen, 2013, p. 485). Researchers, therefore, should discern what type of measurement they will employ to measure what construct underlying noticing.

Furthermore, two more theoretical positions should be kept in mind to attain a better understanding of the notion of noticing. Inspired by Schmidt’s seminal work on noticing, two more models regarding attention and awareness (Robinson, 1995; Tomlin & Vila, 1994) were subsequently proposed in the mid 1990’s. First, Tomlin and Vila (1994) suggested a more fine-grained analysis of attention. According to their model, there are three components of attention with corresponding neurological correlates: a) alertness (readiness to address incoming stimuli), b) orientation (direction of attentional resources to stimuli), and c) detection (selective cognitive registration of stimuli). It is argued that only detection is essential for further processing and learning whereas the other two elements can, at best, promote detection, but neither is a necessary condition. Crucially, Tomlin and Vila (1994), unlike Schmidt (1990), highlighted the role of detection rather than awareness and believed that awareness did not play an important role in L2 learning. Second, Robinson (1995), who built on Cowan’s (1988) model of memory and attention, defined noticing as “detection plus rehearsal in short-term memory, prior to encoding in long-term memory” (p. 296). That is, Robinson incorporated both detention
Attention, Awareness, and Noticing in SLA

Tomlin & Villa, 1994) and awareness (Schmidt, 1990) in his account of noticing, expanding its relationship with working memory. All the theoretical issues mentioned above are open to further experimentation with more valid measures, leaving many intriguing questions unanswered.

Empirical Research on Attention

Attention is generally understood as a “necessary and sufficient condition of long-term storage” (Schmidt, 2001, p. 16) in the field of SLA. Before the 1980s, there was little concern about whether learners virtually paid attention to the target items inputted during L2 learning; it was assumed that learners’ attention would be elicited through instruction or exposure, just as the researchers intended. Resting on this premise, researchers employed the pretest-experimental condition-posttest design with a belief that their experimental conditions would make learners attend to the target forms from the L2 data, naturally resulting in the conversion of input to intake (Leow, 2013a). However, this was a mere assumption that could not be substantiated without empirical testing.

Underlining, a “less intrusive task” (Godfroid et al., 2013, p. 487) than other measures of noticing such as think-alouds, has been an option for researchers to measure learners’ attention in relation to noticing (Izumi & Bigelow, 2000; Uggen, 2012). Learners are asked to underline “the word, words, or parts of the words that are particularly necessary for subsequent production” during a reading task (Izumi & Bigelow, 2000, p. 250). The rationale behind this is that readers normally underline the parts in a text that they actually attend to. Based on this idea, Izumi and Bigelow (2000) linked attention and awareness by arguing that underlining could not help accompanying a certain amount of awareness of the importance of the underlined parts. Uggen (2012), in a conceptual replication of Izumi and Bigelow (2000), focused on probing into the noticing function of output with an attempt to triangulate two different types of measures of noticing: underlining and stimulated recall. Their study aimed to investigate whether output would serve as a trigger of noticing in a subsequent input during input-output-input sequences with a pretest-posttest design. The target structures were the past and present hypothetical conditionals in English. Noticing was measured by means of multiple measures, underlining of the target structures and stimulated recall in an attempt at the methodological triangulation of data sources. After taking pretests, the participants participated in an output activity (i.e., writing an essay) and an input activity (i.e., reading and underlining a model essay) and were asked to write an essay on the same topic given in the previous output activity; these activities were followed by a stimulated recall interview and posttests. The experimental condition was the elicitation of the target structure in the first writing activity. Overall, the results showed the effect of output in promoting noticing, and the complexity and saliency of the target structure were likely to play a role in the success or failure of participants’ noticing. Methodologically, I believe that this study is
highly promising in terms of using multiple measures of noticing. To be specific, underlining was an online index of attention whereas stimulated recall was an off-line measure of awareness. Therefore, by adopting both online and off-line measures for each construct, this study could offer a more balanced picture of the cognitive processes of noticing.

Recently, eye tracking has spurred renewed interests in the measurement of noticing. Whereas underlining “indicates the locus of attention, but it never quantifies attention” (Godfroid et al., 2013, p. 488), eye movement data can provide more accurate information on where and how much attention is being paid. Godfroid et al. (2013) conducted an eye-tracking study that measured the learners’ focal attention on new vocabulary while reading and its relationship to subsequent learning outcomes. Critically, the authors made a distinction between the two constructs of noticing, attention and awareness. It was the first attempt in the field to empirically disentangle attention and awareness. The focus of the study was noticing as attention, which was gauged by an increase in eye-fixation times on target words. Four experimental conditions were created: a) existing word (control condition), b) pseudo-word, c) pseudo-word + existing word, and d) existing word + pseudo-word, and the eye-fixation durations on the lexical targets embedded in English text were compared for the different condition. An incidental acquisition of the target items, pseudo-words, was measured by means of an unannounced vocabulary posttest. The results revealed that the learners’ eye fixations were longer on the novel pseudo-words than on the existing words, and the amount of allocated attention was positively related to the learning gains evidenced on the unannounced post-test. This suggested great potential for eye tracking as a measure of noticing processes in SLA.

Smith (2012) also proposed eye tracking as a measure of noticing recasts in the context of synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC). Specifically, he aimed to test whether participants’ eye-gaze data and stimulated recall data, both employed as measures of noticing, would be compatible, and he further investigated the relationship between noticing events and learning outcomes. In terms of measuring noticing events, along with the eye movement data Smith used heat maps to measure the relative length of eye gaze. He concluded that both measures seemed to be “favorable predictors of noticing” (p. 71), and in terms of the linguistic targets, the semantic and syntactic targets were more easily noticed than were the morphological targets in the recasts. Although these results highlight the value of eye tracking as a measure of noticing, some methodological questions remain. Smith (2012) employed heat maps, a visual representation of eye-tracking data. According to Holmqvist et al. (2011), heat maps may be beneficial in that they can offer a general and intuitive overview of the data that is very easy to understand at a glance. However, at the same time, the simplicity of the data presentation also possibly takes a toll on the precise interpretation of the data, thus requiring researchers to be cautious when employing
these attentional maps. Based on Holmqvist and colleagues’ guideline, a number of problems can be detected from Smith’s (2012) heat map analyses. First, the most critical drawback of using heat maps is that they do not offer “any method for systematic and statistical comparison between conditions” (p. 239) because they merely show the relative eye-gaze duration. In other words, the nature of heat maps is quite “exploratory” (p. 239), and they cannot provide temporal information on eye movement, such as regression duration, “the duration of the fixations when the reader returns to the lookzone” (Simard & Foucambert, 2013, p. 213), which might tempt researchers to rush into a conclusion that favors their own predictions. Second, as Godfroid et al. (2013) accurately noted, the heat map analyses in Smith (2012) could not control the confounding effects of “word length, word frequency, and predictability, among other factors” (p. 490). This might have yielded considerable confounding effects as well. As we can infer from the analyses shown in Smith (2012), currently the utmost need in the field is for our own specific guidelines for using eye-tracking methodology to conduct research focusing on L2 phenomena (Spinner, Gass, & Behney, 2013). Because little guidance is available, the use of eye tracking is often at risk of misleading researchers into making unreliable interpretations of their results.

**Empirical Research on Awareness**

The Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990, 1995, 2001) brought about an imperative question regarding the role of awareness in L2 learning. Since the 2000s, the role of awareness in L2 learning has received much attention and has yielded contradictory findings. Some have maintained that learning without awareness—implicit learning—is possible (e.g., Leung & Williams, 2012; Williams, 2005), whereas others have been pessimistic (e.g., Hama & Leow, 2010; Leow, 1997, 2000). These contradictory findings can be much better understood if one notices that the studies relied on different methodologies to measure awareness. That is, depending on whether online or off-line measures were used, the results differed from each other. Williams (2005), for example, used a post-task interview, one of the non-concurrent/off-line measures, as a measure of awareness to explore the possibility of implicit learning. Four artificial determiners were created as target forms: gi, ro, ul, and ne. Gi and ro were used with objects that were “near” and ul while ne were used with objects that were “far” and this mapping was explicitly described to participants. At the same time, determiners also represented animacy in that gi and ul were used with “animate” objects, whereas ro and ne were used with “inanimate” objects. However, the important aspect of the study is that participants were not informed about this mapping rule of animacy. Next, during a training phase, participants were asked to listen to a sentence and indicate whether the novel word meant “near” or “far” by pressing a key. They then repeated the sentences aloud and were required to create mental images of the general situations. In the testing phase, participants completed the written test, for which they had to choose the most appropriate determiner for a given
noun in the sentence. After participants completed the first session of the test, the post-task interview was conducted. Participants were asked what criteria they had used to answer the questions on the test. The participants who did not mention “living or non-living”, “moves or does-not-move” were regarded as unaware. The results showed above-chance generalization ability in the unaware group, which provided evidence for the implicit learning of form-meaning mapping. However, I believe that the generalizability of the findings is likely somewhat limited because of the specificity of the participants—most of them were “undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Cambridge” (p. 278), and thirty-four percent of them “were studying language-related disciplines” (p. 279). We cannot exclude the possibility that their intelligence and language aptitude were much higher than average, which could have generated a confounding effect in the experiment.

Interestingly, Hama and Leow (2010), a replication of Williams (2005), found different results for learning without awareness. What should be noted is that there were several methodological changes in their study from that of Williams (2005). Most importantly, in their study, awareness was measured both retrospectively and concurrently. That is, the learners engaged in a think-aloud protocol during a training phase as well as in a post-task interview after the training phase. Moreover, the test contained four options rather than two, and both receptive and productive knowledge were measured. The online verbal protocol data obtained from the think-alouds was advantageous because it was “still fresh in working memory” (p. 471) and provided “accessibility to the construct of awareness at the stage of encoding” (p. 477). As a result, unlike Williams (2005), they found that “unaware learners, at the stage of encoding, did not appear to demonstrate any significant animacy bias” (p. 482). It is undeniable that their study showed considerable advances in research design; nonetheless, they could not avoid the reactivity issue of think-aloud protocols. The concern was whether thinking aloud itself could affect learners’ cognitive processes, and the answer to this question seems to still be inconclusive (Bowles, 2010). A solution to this problem would be to combine a within- and a between-subject design in an experiment to control for potential reactive effect (See, Godfroid & Schmidtke, 2013; Godfroid & Spino, 2013).

**Evaluation of the current status of the topic**

There is no perfect methodology for measuring noticing. It seems that researchers are in agreement inasmuch as they do not believe that either online or off-line measures can absolutely gauge learners’ cognitive processes. It is a matter of two sides of the same coin. Instead of arguing that one measure is the best fit, they have begun to address the need to triangulate measures of noticing. It seems that Leow (2013b) exactly described the current state of the topic:

Perhaps employing concurrently both eye-tracking measures and think aloud protocols simultaneously while controlling for reactivity would appear...
At this point in time to be the more appropriate methodological procedure to minimally establish the process of attention (via eye-tracking) and (levels of) awareness (via think alouds). In this way, the internal validity of the study is promoted, and the strengths and limitations of the two procedures are addressed while investigating the process of noticing at exactly the stage at which it is occurring, namely, the input-to-intake stage (p. 19).

As Leow suggested, a combination of techniques would help us to gain a more complete and thorough picture of noticing. A good example of this claim would be Godfroid and Schmidtke’s (2013) study. They triangulated measures of attention and awareness, eye-tracking technology, and verbal reports, and multiple data revealed that attention and awareness are closely associated, lending support to Schmidt’s Noticing Hypothesis (1990, 1995, 2001). Such methodological improvement is expected to increase the reliability and the validity of the obtained findings.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

On the basis of this critical review of the previous research, I would like to emphasize triangulating measures of noticing for future research to compensate for each measure’s drawbacks. Moreover, I would like to mention possible agendas for further research on noticing. First, little research in this area has focused on non-Roman languages, such as Chinese, Korean, or Japanese. Most studies related to noticing have investigated English, Spanish, Italian, German and French, and it is somewhat obvious that attention to non-Roman languages as second languages has been relatively scant in the mainstream SLA research. When evaluating the role of noticing, the target language itself may play a role to some extent, possibly owing to the considerable differences between the Roman and non-Roman alphabets. For example, cross-language transfer of orthographic processing skills is likely to elicit different reading patterns or viewing behaviors in bilingual processing. Thus, encouraging the expansion of the learner population within various contexts is needed to enhance the validity of studies on noticing and to ascertain the robustness of previous findings on the role of attention, awareness, and noticing.

Second, there is room for further investigation of the diverse variables that could affect noticing. For example, the characteristics of the target structures, saliency, difficulty, and redundancy (Uggen, 2012), may influence noticing. Also, future research is encouraged to include learners’ proficiency as a variable as well.

Third, another avenue worth pursuing in future research on noticing is to take into account a broad array of individual-difference factors, both cognitive and affective, for the research design. In-depth research into how individual differences affect noticing in diverse learning conditions will create a strong bond between SLA research and L2 classrooms and will provide pedagogical advantages with respect to the implementation of learner-centered, tailor-made instruction.
References


Philp, J. (2012). Noticing hypothesis. In P.


Attention, Awareness, and Noticing in SLA Center.
Kim McDonough is an Associate Professor in Applied Linguistics at Concordia University. She earned her M.A. in TESOL from Michigan State University and her Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics from Georgetown University. Her research interests include psycholinguistic approaches to second language acquisition, classroom-based acquisition research, usage-based approaches to acquisition, and task-based language teaching. She delivered a keynote speech at the 2014 Second Language Studies Symposium titled *Using structural priming tasks in L2 classrooms*, and kindly spared some time for this interview after her keynote address.

Could you tell me about your life as an M.A. TESOL student at MSU?

It was a long time ago, from 1996 to 1998, and I had just come back from 4 years in Thailand, so I was having a little bit of culture shock to get used to American culture as opposed to Thai culture. But it was great. I started in the summer session, and I really enjoyed the M.A. program. I was really lucky to have a chance to do research as a research assistant with Charlene Polio, Sue Gass, and Allison Mackey. Then, when I realized that I really liked research, I wanted to go on to pursue a Ph.D., which wasn’t my goal when I started the M.A. program. I just wanted to get an M.A. and go back to Thailand. I found out I loved research when I was doing my M.A.

Do you remember any fun things you experienced while studying at MSU?

While I was studying at MSU, most of the fun things came when I was a teaching assistant at the ELC. I loved all the fun things we had to do with students. For example, in the fall, we went to an apple farm and do the hayride. One summer, I rented a van and drove my students to Cedar Point, where we spent the whole day, which was fun. Once, I almost got into trouble because we had an end-of-semester party, and I didn’t realize that we can’t drink on campus because I just came back from Thailand. So, all my students and I were drinking beer, and the police came. It was embarrassing. That was a bit of culture shock because in Thailand it would be okay at the end of the semester for an adult class.

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

That’s because of teaching. My undergraduate degrees are in political science and studies in religion, so I went to Thailand and started teaching English there. That’s how I got involved. So I really came to the field of applied linguistics through language teaching. I started to realize what I did well as a teacher, what I didn’t, and how much I didn’t know about how learning happened.

What motivated your particular interest in priming research and task-based language teaching?

That happened because of my
dissertation. My dissertation was on feedback and modified output. I found in my data that I frequently saw students, when they are interacting with each other to carry out my test, after they had received feedback, they would modify their output and then they would use the structure again, like two or three more questions, or one student started using a particular question type and their partner started using it. So I saw that in my data but I didn’t know how to describe it in terms of any type of SLA or applied linguistics research because it hadn’t been talked about. So I went digging around and found structural priming research in psycholinguistics, and then I said that’s what’s happening in my data. So that’s how I got interested in priming research.

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

It’s a priming study, and we are looking at relative clauses and prepositional phrases. It’s a lab-based study. So what we would expect to find is that if you prefer prepositional phrases at the baseline, we can prime you for relative clauses and it has the positive impact on your subsequent production, but what we have included are some tests of working memory, statistical learning, and pattern detection. So right now we are correlating those test scores with the primed production to see if we see any relationships. And the other thing we have included was after the activities were all done, we asked them to rate certain sentence types in terms of how frequently they think the sentence types happened during the conversation. Because we were trying to get at, “Were they aware of the fact that there were so many relative clauses and prepositional phrases that the research was using?” And we also asked them explicitly if there is any type of grammar that they found to be very common in these conversations.

So what we wanted to see is if they had any awareness at any level of the fact that these two structures were prevalent in the conversation, but I don’t know what’s going on. My research assistants are coding the data right now. So you have to come to the conference to find out.

A body of psycholinguistic studies using priming methods has been conducted to provide practical implications for L2 teaching and learning. What do you think about the effectiveness of such attempts to fill the gap between theory and practice?  

That’s actually something that I have been thinking a lot about lately. I think I talked about this in this talk I just gave. I think a typical approach from any theory is that we have to do a large body of empirical research in the lab under tightly controlled conditions first. Only then should we move to the classroom setting. And sometimes I think it might be okay to have a more bottom-up approach. That is, we observe what is going on in the classroom first, and try to figure out how we can bring in the knowledge we have about SLA, interaction, task, or priming. Then, we can just see what happens. Even though each classroom we go into might be different, everything what we are doing is relevant in that classroom context. So it’s hard to say what is better, whether to have a large body of relevant classroom-based research that we can then try to find common themes across or to have a large set of lab-based research with its greater control, and then try to apply that finding in the classroom context. I am not sure. I think we can go both ways. We often think that research has to begin in the lab, and the results are applied to the classroom, but I think we can go the other way as well.

Have you experienced any difficulties in applying some theoretical findings obtained from experimental settings to
authentic teaching or learning contexts?
Yeah. I think the reality is that the classroom often provides obstacles for a clear transfer of what you have done in a lab to what you can do in the classroom. There are so many more factors at play in a classroom. They are what the teacher believes as effective, what the teacher wants to do, what the administration believes as appropriate, whether or not there are certain standard competencies or tests that students are supposed to pass, students’ beliefs about what’s an effective use of class time, students’ interests and willingness to engage in activities with each other, and the relevance of the activities to the curriculum. All of these factors come into play, which make things completely unexpected. We don’t know what is going to happen. So there are a lot more factors that have to be taken into consideration. For example, when conducting a classroom-based study, I have had several teachers telling me, “I wouldn’t use those tasks in my class.” They sometimes just refused to use the task when I showed them the task before implementing a study. Then, I say, “Oh, okay. Let me make you another one.”

Over the years you have explored the role of collaborative syntactic priming tasks in eliciting more advanced and accurate constructions. What do you think about the longitudinal influences of such priming influences on L2 learners’ acquisition of target structures?
I think the influence of priming on second language acquisition depends on the target structure. If you are to see some longitudinally developmental progression of the form, you need to identify whether learners are prepared for the target form. Also, when you are trying to get second language learners to the next level of the structure, you need to use priming to push their development along. I think it is likely to have a longer term effect that would not go back to the previous stage, so I think that can be useful. But if it is something more like you can say active or you can say passive, I am going to prime you to use passives. If they don’t have to use passives later on, then they are not going to use them. It is kind of a manipulation of input. You are flooding them. It is almost like an input flood. I am flooding you with input, but I don’t think that input flood is going to help because of the input. I think it is going to help you because of the output you produce in response to that input. So it is almost like the input is a means to the end to elicit the production. So I think it can have a long-lasting impact, but in other contexts, it might be fleeting simply because the structure you are priming them to produce is one that is restricted to a particular discourse context. So in the absence of that discourse context in the future, they have no need to use the structure.

As a professor and supervisor, what advice can you give for PhD students to be good researchers in this field?
Research what you love. It always makes me sad when Ph.D. students come and say, “What should I do for my dissertation?” So, it is like, “What are you interested in?” I could give you a topic. I could give you topics all day. I could sit here and give you 20 topics that I don’t have time to investigate. No problem. Here you go. Here is your study. I can even give you the variables for you, but why? Why are you here? Why are you doing this? What are you going to do for the rest of your career? Would you call me every time you need to do a project? What are you interested in? You have to have some passion, some burning questions, something that will get you through the process of “It’s 3 am, and I am sitting here doing stats. I can’t get any findings, and I hate this. I will quit.” I mean
you need a burning question or passionate desire to find an answer to a question that is going to get you through that. So that is my advice for one. And for two, don’t try to do too much in the dissertation study. It is just one study. Don’t be too greedy. Don’t include too many variables. Just ask a really good question, and it is okay if it is just a simple question if it is a good question. Last, pick your supervisor well. Don’t just pick based on expertise in the field. Pick one you can get along with. Is this someone that you really want to spend a lot of time with in his/her office for the next three years? So put together a team with people you feel comfortable with, you are happy talking to, and you are not intimidated by or uncomfortable around because that’s not going to help you get done.

**Before we end this interesting interview, is there anything you would like to add?**

Thank you for having me back. It has been really fun. I haven’t been here since I graduated, so it has been great. I know the weather has been bad, but apparently that’s common everywhere. It is getting better. The sun just came out. Thank you for inviting me back. It’s been fun.
Interview With Dr. Luke Plonsky
Interviewed by Talip Gonulal
Second Language Studies Program
Michigan State University
gonulalt@msu.edu

Luke Plonsky is Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics at Northern Arizona University. His research interests include instructed second language acquisition, quantitative research methods with a specific focus on study designs, the use of statistics, research synthesis, and meta-analysis. He gave the keynote address at the Second Language Studies Symposium at Michigan State University. This interview was conducted on February 21, 2014. For more information about Dr. Plonsky, please visit his website:
http://oak.ucc.nau.edu/ldp3/index.html

Could you tell us about how you first got involved in second language research?
Probably like a lot of people, I started off getting interested in second language research as a second language learner. Then I got a lot more interested when I started teaching. At the time I was taking several courses in language teaching methods and SLA. I began to get curious and wanted to understand more about the second language learning process, how that could inform second language instruction and how we might be able to improve second language instruction via a better understanding of second language learning.

You are a very productive scholar in the field. Could you briefly describe the projects that you are currently working on?
It is a fun question to think about. So, I have both substantively oriented and methodologically oriented projects. Right now, most of my research is methodologically oriented, but in the substantive domain, I have a study right now under review. It is a meta-analysis of pronunciation instruction. This is one of the few areas of L2 instruction that has not yet been meta-analyzed. Before getting involved in the study, I did not know much about pronunciation instruction. I was invited to be a part of the project as the methodologist on the research team. As I got more involved in the project, I became more interested in the area. Other projects I have going on right now are mostly methodologically oriented. One example would be the synthesis of sampling practices that I talked about here this weekend. Sampling is important, among other reasons, for establishing generalizability across L2 research, yet we as a field do not pay much attention to it. I have another study in press that is looking at the distribution of effect sizes from primary and meta-analytic studies. The main point of the study is to help second language researchers better interpret and contextualize the effect they obtain. We, L2 researchers, have started to report effects sizes more and more but we are not doing anything with them. So, what is the point of reporting effect sizes if we are not going to use them in their full potential? We should use them in some meaningful ways to help interpret the results. I am also in the early stage of a project that looks at and describes data collection instrumentations in second language research. Specifically, I am looking at reliability. I have looked at the extent to
which reliability is reported before, but this study will be looking at actual/observed reliability across a wide sample of second language research. It is hard to know what good reliability is because right now we, L2 researchers, are basically guessing. In this study I will meta-analyze reliability coefficients to help us understand: what is good reliability, what is high, and what is low in relation to the rest of field. In addition, as in most meta-analyses, I also look at whether reliability estimates vary as a function of study or instrument features. For example, we might expect high reliability of larger samples or higher reliability with standardized tests compared to researcher-generated tests or teacher-generated tests. We may also get higher reliability with certain L2 skills. For instance, reading may produce higher reliability than listening. I am speculating now. We will see what types of study features might be associated with reliability as observed.

Obviously, meta-analysis is one of your main research interests. As far as I know, the first examples of meta-analysis in our field are Norris and Ortega (2000), and Goldschneider and DeKeyser (2001). Meta-analysis is slowly finding its way into L2 research.

As an expert in this area, could you give us some more information about the history of meta-analysis? What are the potential contributions of meta-analysis to our field?

I think meta-analysis has a lot of potential as a way to bring together previous research in a way that is more systematic, more objective and quantitative, as opposed to traditional reviews of literature. So, whenever a researcher is interested in reviewing a set of studies in a given area, it could and should be an option. However, you have to be careful. I describe it as more objective and more systematic because it is not purely objective. A lot of researcher judgment involved in meta-analysis and a lot of choices, just like in any study. So, there is therefore room for error and biases but less. In addition, the reviewer’s expertise is never removed from the process. The reviewer’s expertise is actually essential at all steps in the process. For example, it is essential to defining the domain, developing the coding scheme, and interpreting the results, because only an expert in the area would know what items are worth coding for. I would also add that the potential of meta-analysis to inform L2 research is perhaps less retrospective but more prospective. What I mean is that a good meta-analysis, in my opinion, is not the one that simply summarizes previous research but the one that takes that research and perspective, and uses it to push forward future research. A good meta-analysis does not seek to close doors. In fact, it opens up new ones because it shows us which areas still need further research. And just as importantly, a good meta-analysis is also able to comment on and make empirically based suggestions for areas for improvement of the domain in question. A young field like ours need meta-analyses that look back, yes, but that also move us forward.

What are the best journals to submit meta-analysis studies? Do you have any suggestions for research synethists and meta-analysts?

Well, it is a difficult question. I think it depends on the focus of the study. Language Learning has perhaps the strongest culture or tradition of publishing systematic synthesizes such as meta-analyses, and some of the best meta-analyses in the field have certainly appeared there. However, narrower or focused meta-analyses, what you might call ‘local meta-analyses’, such as CALL research, might not have this much of an audience and might be a better fit for CALL-oriented journals. So, it depends on the topic and the scope of the study, I
would say. There is value in these really broad types of studies. But, again, I also see value in more focused meta-analyses such Lyster and Saito (2010). Even though the domain of the paper is narrow, it still has a lot to say about that domain and makes really specific comments on it. So, it is hard to say with journals. Some journals have not yet published any meta-analyses but I think they will. Time will tell.

As a final question, what advice do you have for second language researchers, especially for those who are interested in quantitative research?

Well, that is another fine question to think about. My recommendations would be to develop a broad understanding of quantitative methods. I also think that it is important to find your niche. In the quantitative domain I think it can be helpful both to advance in the field and to establish yourself as an expert in something. And in some cases, it might be useful to take additional statistics classes and to study independently. Further, it might be helpful to work with people from other domains, departments or fields as a way to gain in-depth expertise in a unique analysis or technique. It can also help introduce new ideas into your program, or into the field as a whole.

References
**Review of LEAP: Learning English for Academic Purposes (Reading and Writing)**


Phuong Thi Lan Nguyen  
MA TESOL Program  
Michigan State University  
nguye332@msu.edu

*LEAP: Learning English for Academic Purposes (Reading and Writing)* is one book in Pearson’s series of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) for high-intermediate and advanced learners. The book has eight chapters which cover topics in different fields, for example education, psychology, business, and biology. Each chapter deals with both reading and writing skills. A consistent format is adopted throughout all chapters, starting with an overview (that describes the objectives and features of the chapter), followed by a “Gearing – Up” activity (that aims to activate and build learners’ schema), reading (that intends to provide input), and writing (for language production). The book dedicates a separate part “Vocabulary Build” in each chapter to building learners’ awareness and repertoire of words having high usage frequency in the Academic Word List. It also includes other sections such as “Focus on Reading”, “Focus on Writing”, and “Academic Survival Skills” which provide explicit instructions on developing reading and writing skills in academic settings. In addition, the book offers learners information of online support for learners’ further practice and provides credits for the presented materials.

The above mentioned format shows that, in general, the book adopts the traditional Present-Practice-Produce model, where target items are presented, practiced and then produced. To be more specific, the content that learners need to acquire is first presented and practiced through activities on reading and vocabulary, and then produced through those on writing. Because of this model, learners are carefully prepared for practice and provided with chance to consolidate their acquisition. More importantly, this book shows a strong link between reading and writing, which is a typical feature of academic writing. In this book, writing always follows reading and is closely related to the reading content, and learners have to write based on what they read. As Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) pointed out, vocabulary acquisition depends upon learners’ involvement in processing new words, i.e. whether they know they need those words, or have to search for and evaluate them. The strong link between reading and writing the book offers learners
a purpose to read and to build vocabulary, as they know input from the reading and vocabulary parts will be needed for writing tasks that follow.

Reading and writing are the two target skills of this textbook, and they are well presented. For reading, the book covers a wide range of reading subskills, such as identifying key words, skimming, scanning, recognizing organizational patterns, relating text organization to content. Reading activities not only activate but also build schema (i.e. background knowledge), which provides the opportunity to integrate learners’ previous experience and stimulate learners’ interest. An example is in Chapter 5. The Overview provides learners with information about Steve Job’s struggle against pancreatic cancer and two types of alternative medicine and conventional medicine (building schema), while the Gearing Up asks for learners’ opinion of treatment for specific health problems (activating schema). Moreover, these activities are constructed based on a balance between top-down and bottom-up approaches. For example, the Gearing Up in each chapter asks for learners’ experiences, attitudes, or opinions (top-down), and the following Vocabulary Build exposes learners to words included in reading (bottom-up). This combination promotes learning since it provides chances for learners to practice linguistic items and make learners notice the relevance of materials at the same time. Another strength of the book is its reading materials, which offer lengthy readings taken from authentic sources (textbooks, newspapers, magazines, and Web resources). Reading passages in

English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) classes are often short to facilitate a focus on language development and suit the class time frame. As a consequence, learners are likely to face a gap of length between what they are provided in ESL/EFL classes and what they actually read in content courses. Therefore, lengthy materials will be beneficial in preparing learners for their future content courses. Another beneficial and innovative point of the reading part in this textbook is that it presents divergent viewpoints on common topics and facilitates learners’ expression of opposing ideas. For example, a reading in Chapter 6 tries to persuade readers of the danger of vaccination. Such divergence is useful because it highlights the importance of critical thinking and standing up to defend one’s ideas, both of which are highly important in an academic context.

Finally, the author manages to create a sense of real-life academic reading through fully referencing all readings. In my opinion, such reference not only gives learners a sense of authenticity, but also creates enthusiasm and confidence for learners. This can give students a sense of confidence since they know they can read authentic academic passages.

As for the writing part, the book adopts the process-based approach (p. iii). This approach focuses on the steps through which a piece of work is written, commented, and rewritten, and regards writing not as language reproduction but development of organization and meaning (Matsuda, 2003). In each chapter, learners are initially required to write a short essay in response to a prompt related to the previous
reading. They will receive feedback from teacher or classmates on this assignment. Then they will be given more input through two other relevant readings, vocabulary exercises, and instructions on writing, and, finally, write a final essay which may include paragraphs from the previous one they wrote. This procedure allows learners to receive feedback between drafts and look at appropriate input for their writing. The book also sets models for learners’ writing in the Models chapter located at the end of the book. This chapter provides writing samples for all writing assignments, and further instructs learners on how to complete the assignments (e.g., analyzing structure of short answers, listing steps to do a survey and instructing how to write a report, using graphic organizers to illustrates the structure of a writing). Another advantage of the writing part is that it covers different writing skills which are presented in a progression of difficulty in order to foster learners’ enthusiasm (Garinger, 2002). For example, learners are exposed to different genres (such as survey reports, process essays and persuasive essays) and numerous writing techniques (such as introducing examples into a text, using various sentence structures and writing definition). Another example is the final writing assignment in the last chapter which requires learners to write the longest essay (three to four pages) compared to those in the previous chapters (especially short answers in Chapter 1). This length provides learners a chance, and a challenge, to effectively integrate all skills that they have practiced so far and instructors a chance to assess learners’ acquisition.

One accomplishment regarding skill development is that the book actually provides learners with skills rather than just helping them to practice. This is shown through the presentation of explicit instruction in a salient way. For example, Chapter 1 introduces some strategies of dealing with unknown words. These instructions are put in grey boxes so they can be distinguished from normal texts and ensures that learners can identify them easily. Further, the book dedicates a separate part (Academic Survival Skills) in each chapter to developing learners’ academic skills. These skills cover avoiding plagiarism by using citations and references, paraphrasing, or summarizing, asking questions using correct word order, learning independently, and expressing opposing opinions. I find this part very helpful because it raises learners’ awareness about some practices in tertiary academic settings.

Vocabulary building is also well developed. The book does a great job in providing a reason for learners to study new words. It does so by presenting vocabulary items with a clear marking which items are included in the Academic Word List. Another new feature, compared with other textbooks, is that it introduces learners to the idea of using a vocabulary notebook (Chapter 4, p. 83). This facilitates learners’ self-study and highlights the need of studying vocabulary in context. In addition, strategies for dealing with vocabulary are presented explicitly. For example, learners are instructed on how to guess new words from context, which is highly recommended to promote analysis of reading strategies and evaluation of vocabulary alternatives.
Another example is that this book explicitly teaches two word forms, adjective and adverb, by either printing the words in bold type, or using abbreviation (“adv.” for adverb and “adj.” for adjective) to mark them. Such salience is needed given the fact that these important word forms are often neglected because of a common misunderstanding that learners can infer them from their nouns or verbs (Schmitt & Zimmerman, 2002). Multiword units are also covered in this part. There are numerous examples of this kind: “commit to” (phrasal verb, p. 18), “motor skills” (collocation, p. 8), and “as a result of” (formulaic expression, p. 154). Boers and Lindstromberg (2012), and Hyland (2012) emphasized the importance of attracting learners’ attention to these units since it will raise their awareness about these vocabulary items, especially in academic contexts, and improve their vocabulary acquisition as well.

Apart from the strong points discussed above, there are some shortcomings that affect the book’s effectiveness. First, it would be even more attractive to learners if instead of using an asterisk to mark which vocabulary items are included in the Academic Word List, the author used different symbols to indicate their level of usage frequency in the list. This is not an infeasible task because the Academic Word List itself has already been organized in sublists which are divided based on the criterion of usage frequency (Coxhead, 2000). Secondly, although the author tries to raise learners’ awareness about citation and reference, she does not name any specific citation and reference style (e.g., APA or MLA) for students to follow. Explicitly introducing specific citation styles would make clear to learners that there are detailed guidelines for them to follow and they do not have to worry. Further, sample writings in the Models Chapter do not reflect citation in a commonly recognized format (she uses only footnotes to provide references instead of integral citations). I believe this will cause even more confusion to learners. Third, the book covers various topic areas, which might be too challenging for learners regarding their language production and can, therefore, discourage them. For example, Chapter 3 requires learners to write an essay to explain how a company can market a product to a target group of customers (marketing); then Chapter 6 asks them to write an essay on how vaccines stimulate the adaptive immune system and how people can evaluate information about vaccine safety (medicine). These are two completely different areas, and it is not often the case that a student majors in both of them so he or she ever has to read about these different areas.

In terms of the layout, I find myself eager and enthusiastic to use the book because of its numerous vivid visual aids such as graphic organizers and photos. Its colorful but not glossy presentation is another strong point of this book. The clear labeling of the book’s constituents, the consistent format of all chapters, and the clear introduction of the book’s structure ensure convenience for users.

In my opinion, the book generally meets the author’s objectives. As stated by the author, the book aims to bridge the gaps
between ESL/EFL programs, EAP courses, and academic content courses. These gaps are created because the length and complexity of reading materials and writing tasks in these courses are different. Through the selection of authentic materials, the introduction of numerous activities on developing academic skills and building vocabulary, and the adoption of the process-based approach, the author manages to create a feeling of real-life reading and writing in academic settings.

In terms of target audience, the series which this book belongs to is designed for high-intermediate and advanced learners. The Proficiency Guidelines for writing and reading proposed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (2012) describe advanced writers as those being able to write long narratives or descriptions, develop arguments, as well as summarize and report facts, and advanced readers being able to understand authentic texts and derive meaning from argumentative texts. The above evaluation of the textbook content demonstrates that these characteristics are all addressed in an effective way.

In general, this book meets the objective of preparing learners for academic content courses in English. Using it will set a comprehensive foundation for learners’ performance in their higher education.

References


Review of Reading Explorer 2

Denisse M. Hinojosa
Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education Program
Michigan State University
hinojo18@msu.edu

Reading comprehension is described by Goodman as an “… active process of comprehending [where] students need to be taught strategies to read more efficiently (e.g., guess from context, define expectations, make inferences about the text, skim ahead to fill in the context, etc.” (cited in Grabe, 1991, p. 377). It is obvious that the author, Paul MacIntyre, considered these strategies when designing the reading activities for his textbook, Reading Explorer 2. For readers to become fluent, they need to interact with the text (Alyousef, 2005). Furthermore, for readers to be effective, they have to be able to combine information from the text and from previous knowledge in order to be able to build meaning and to use different strategies when facing problems. This textbook provides learners with the necessary tools to become both effective and skillful readers. The author also considered learners’ previous knowledge to be interwoven with the text in the process of making meaning (Anderson, 2003). All these features were highly considered by Paul MacIntyre when writing this textbook. Designed to develop reading skills, Reading Explorer 2 presents a wide variety of interesting thematic passages allowing the learner to master reading comprehension using authentic content. At the same time, the wide variety of activities allows learners to activate schemata, which makes it easier to understand unknown reading passages. Finally, these activities enable learners to build vocabulary, which is presented in context.

Reading Explorer is a six-level series of intensive reading texts and Reading Explorer 2 is one level in that series. It uses articles from National Geographic Magazine to promote reading comprehension and to develop the vocabulary skills of ESL young adults and adult learners. The length of the reading passages, vocabulary presented, level of difficulty of texts, and comprehension questions make Reading Explorer 2 a textbook suitable for learners whose proficiency ranges from upper-basic to low-intermediate. The textbook contains twelve units, and each unit has two reading passages whose topics are related. For instance, in lesson 4A students read about the “Grand Central Terminal” in Manhattan, and in lesson 4B they read about “Mumbai: City of Dreams.”

The textbook begins with an Explore the World section, which presents the topics that are going to be explored. In these two pages, students can see the world map and the exact location where the events described in the reading passages take place. At the end of each unit there is an interactive CD-ROM video activity section called Explore More which
reviews the vocabulary learned in the unit. In the first Explore More section of the book, the author introduces a preview activity about “Greek Olives.” Learners are asked to decide if the statements are true or false based on their previous knowledge. After doing so, they can check their answers as they watch a video. Finally, learners have to complete a summary using vocabulary from presented to them.

After every three units there is a Review section that reinforces the vocabulary presented. For example, Review 2 has two sections; in section A there is a crossword, and in section B students are required to complete notes the with vocabulary used on preceeding pages. Following the Review, there is a section called World Heritage Spotlight containing readings about UNESCO’s World Heritage sites and tackling world issues. One World Heritage Spotlight called “Underwater Wonders” describes the Great Barrier Reef in Queensland, Australia. Another World Heritage Spotlight introduces one of the United States of America’s National Parks, “The Grand Canyon.”

The reading passages contain meaningful and interesting L2 realia, allowing learners to have a better understanding of the world we live in, explore different cultures around the globe, learn science facts, while simultaneously reflecting on social issues. By providing authentic readings, the textbook allows learners to “build language competence, progress in their reading ability, become more independent in their studies, acquire cultural knowledge, and develop confidence and motivation to carry on learning” (Hedge, 2003, pp. 204-205). Reading Explorer 2 comes with: a teacher’s manual, text/audio CD package, classroom audio CD, assessment CD-Rom with Exam View Pro test-generating software, and also quizzes and activities which can be accessed at a supplementary website.

Each unit begins with a warm-up activity, which is commendable because according to Nation (2009), warm-up activities activate learners’ prior knowledge and get students interested in the topic. For instance, the warm-up activity of Unit 8A encourages students to discuss some great explorers from history and the places these explorers visited. Then the learners are directed to imagine themselves as explorers. Afterwards they have the opportunity to discuss with their groups their imaginary role of being an explorer. Activities for the texts are offered pre-, during, and post reading. It allows learners to interact dynamically with the text and later leads them to become fluent readers (Alyousef, 2005). The pre-reading activities facilitate comprehension by activating learners’ schemata, encouraging readers to make predictions, and at the same time motivating them (Alyousef, 2005; Chen & Graves, 1998; Drucker, 2003). For example, to activate learners’ schemata, in Unit 6A the book requires learners to correct true or false statements. To do so, learners need to look at the map at the top of the page, and then read the first four sentences of the text. After that, students are required to make predictions by reading the title, headings, and captions, and by looking at the photos. Another example is found in Unit 9B, where learners are asked to look at the photos and captions, and compare weddings in Italy, India, and Alaska, USA with weddings in their own countries. Next, the book asks learners to skim for the main idea of the
text by looking at the title, photos, and captions. Comprehension is facilitated when schemata are introduced explicitly because this helps activate the relevant schema. According to schema theory, in order for learners to comprehend a text, there must exist an interaction between the reader's background knowledge and the text itself (Drucker, 2003). When learners' schema is activated during the pre-reading activities, they are able to recognize the knowledge they already have about the topic of a text, which simultaneously provides context (Alyousef, 2005; Drucker, 2003).

The during- and post-reading exercises are designed for students to develop reading strategies which enable learners to reason, think critically, and reflect on what they are doing while reading. This is achieved when students work through various tasks, such as predicting, skimming, making inferences, raising reference questions, and scanning. Other examples include making references between sentences and putting events in order (Dole, Dufft, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991). One example is found in unit 4A, where students have to answer five multiple choice questions. There are two questions regarding details, one inference, one vocabulary, and one purpose question. After that, learners are required to complete a cloze section based on the Grand Central Terminal reading passage. Additionally, the author provided different types of questions, written on the left side of each one. By doing so, learners are able to recognize the questions they are to answer. For example, in Unit 6A, the multiple-choice questions include the following types: gist, detail, inference, and main idea, followed by a completion exercise. In Unit 12A, the types of questions are gist, inference, detail, vocabulary, and sequence.

Throughout the textbook, learners are exposed to a variety of reading passages accompanied by full color images from the National Geographic Magazine. These images are highly engaging and help get the readers’ interest as well as develop visual literacy (Avgerinou & Ericson, 1997; Chalin, 1998).

Vocabulary building is a large focus in Reading Explorer 2, and vocabulary is presented in context. Words of related meaning are not presented together. Through the entire textbook, the author used the criteria of usefulness and normal use. High-frequency words are presented as they occur in normal situations. This, helps students avoid interference, and eases vocabulary learning (Nation, 2000). It does not mean that lower frequency words are not considered; on the contrary, they are glossed in footnotes in every text. In Unit 9B, the words nomads, mosque, fierce, cousin, and warrior are presented. Unit 10B allows learners to get familiarized with the words fjord, harpoon, scowls, and gem.

Along the reading passages, key words are found in red; this makes learners aware of the new vocabulary that is being introduced. At the end of every unit, there is a Vocabulary Practice section in which the author provided various exercises giving students the opportunity to learn vocabulary in context. For example, learners need to place words in context and provide definitions; they also have to match words with their definitions and complete sentences and paragraphs with the words provided. Additional vocabulary practice is also found in the four Review sections and in the Vocabulary Building sections.
To help learners improve their vocabulary, the author included vocabulary building boxes, which aim to highlight and draw readers’ attention to common collocations, affixes, and usage to promote their acquisition (Dole et al., 1991). For instance, by introducing the collocation of the verb “obtain” in Unit 7 B, learners are aware that “obtain” is placed after an adjective and an infinitive; at the same time it could be placed before a noun. Another example is introduced in Unit 10B, in which students learn about the usage of the informal expression “I’m starving!” The way the author presents these vocabulary building boxes helps learners find explicit explanation of useful collocations and constructions that help them increase their vocabulary. The Reading Explorer 2 interactive CD-ROM helps learners improve their reading skills, and concurrently reinforces learning both high-frequency and low-frequency words. The CD-ROM contains twelve video clips from National Geographic Digital Media. For instance, in Unit 2 the video is called Man’s Best Friend, and in Unit 11 learners can watch a video called Kenya Butterflies. These short videos, which motivate students and aid in visual learning, are related to the topics covered in every unit of the book. Additionally this multimedia tool provides twenty-four additional reading passages for learners to continue practicing their reading skills and forty-eight vocabulary activities with self-scoring exercises, which is ideal for learners to review the vocabulary they have learned throughout the units. The CD-ROM enables learners to have extra language support and to practice in class or at home.

Reading Explorer 2 is a textbook suitable for learners who intend to focus on vocabulary and academic reading in intensive reading courses because it helps students increase the use of learning strategies throughout the units. This is a key element which enhances language acquisition. I strongly recommend Reading Explorer 2 to ESL instructors who seek to promote more active readers through authentic reading materials. Reading Explorer 2 provides meaningful context, enhancing readers’ knowledge in various topics of interest. This is an excellent textbook for promoting learners’ independence and autonomy through incorporating essential reading skills and vocabulary learning tasks. It helps students develop fluency and effective reading comprehension skills, as well as achieve lexical competence.

References
selections for ESL students. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 41*(7), 570-572.


