THE WHY, WHAT, HOW AND WHO OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE RESEARCH

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SUMMARY

In the present article we point out the importance of research in the area of foreign language teaching and then go on to discuss the main concerns of foreign language research: the language itself, the language learning process, the language teaching process, the teaching-learning environment. Next, we briefly review the methods commonly used in language teaching research and then conclude with some of the benefits resulting from action research carried out by foreign language teachers in their own classrooms.

KEY WORDS

Research, language learning, language teaching, research methods, action research.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo pretende en primer lugar señalar la importancia de la investigación en el campo de la enseñanza de idiomas y luego examinar las principales áreas de investigación en este campo: el idioma mismo, el proceso de aprendizaje, el proceso de enseñanza, el contexto aprendizaje-enseñanza. Mencionamos los métodos que se suelen emplear en la investigación en el campo de los idiomas y concluimos con algunos de los beneficios que proceden de la investigación-acción.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Investigación, aprendizaje de idiomas, enseñanza de idiomas, métodos de investigación, investigación-acción.

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The urge towards research and investigation is a constant in human beings; it could be said that most important developments of the species are the result of a research attitude, be it primitive or sophisticated. Given the importance of the idea of research in general, we should hardly need to justify a concern with research in the particular area of foreign language learning. However, in the field of foreign languages, there is often a wary skepticism regarding research among teachers, probably for a number of reasons. One of these is certainly the feeling that academic research is not clearly useful to the language teacher; though it is all fine and good that researchers provide high-sounding theoretical recommendations, the teacher must walk into his classroom and teach something. Teachers have an urgency and an interest in very practical matters not always shared by researchers. Also, in research there may sometimes be an element, real or imagined, of condescension which irritates teachers, and at other times a degree of complication and technicality which confuses them. Furthermore, research may lack a vital element: a real desire to advance the state of knowledge in one's field. All too often the motive to carry out research in the academic world has not been primarily professional development but professional prestige. The academic institutions have perhaps been to blame for this situation, as they have introduced the fear known in Anglo-Saxon university circles as «publish or perish», but research carried out for this reason is not always convincing. Professional prestige should never be the motive for but rather the result of research, and a desire to communicate with other members of one's profession should be an integral part of the research impulse.

Since this suspicion of research is occasionally quite prominent, it would perhaps not be amiss to consider some of the benefits from research for those involved with the teaching of a foreign language, keeping in mind, of course, that not all reasons for doing foreign language research apply to all situations. Most obviously, foreign language research increases the body of knowledge about the many varied aspects of language learning—from the structure of language itself, through the process of language acquisition, to methodology and teaching policy. Thus it contributes to the theoretical baggage which, whether we are aware of it or not, lies behind language teaching practice and influences it in many ways. Although there is a tendency to believe that good teachers are born, not made, thus presupposing the uselessness of theoretical knowledge in the formation of a teacher, it cannot reasonably be doubted that this theoretical knowledge proceeding from research adds perceptibly to whatever innate qualities the teacher may possess.

The results of research may in many cases be destined merely to increase the fund of knowledge available in a certain area, but there may be more concrete uses, such as giving us information so that we may try—either on a personal level or on the level of educational policies—to lessen the distance between realities and intentions. Research, then, may provide us with a rational base for changing our behavior in the classroom as individual teachers or for modifying broad and far-reaching aspects of a regional or national language teaching policy. In fact, Christopher Brumfit considers the main
function of educational research to be feedback: «from the research results offered, we are able to attempt to assess the effectiveness of our educational system... Ideally, this process of experiment, report, implementation, observation and feedback would be a permanent feature of any educational system.» (Brumfit 1980: 132). In addition, research can lead to more effective materials development and curriculum planning. As expenditure on education is often sizeable, research done previous to implementation can prevent misuse of resources. Beginning a program based only on intuition is a risky affair. Foreign language teaching is especially prone to whims and pendulous changes; a research-based attitude can keep language teaching on a steadier, surer course while at the same time opening up new perspectives.

Not the least of the reasons for engaging in research is to combat the accusations of lack of professionalism often directed towards language teachers. A strong, well-researched theoretical base would contribute to eliminating some of the criticism leveled at language teaching, which has often developed from merely intuitive rather than empirical sources.

After having looked at some of the answers for the «why» of the foreign language research question, we might consider the «what», i.e. the areas in which research is possible and necessary.

The content of foreign language research could be said to be organized around four main focal points or factors relating to a) the language itself, b) the language learning process, c) the language teaching process and d) the environment, which may affect language learning either through the formation of attitudes toward the language or through the societal control of the language teaching processes. Most foreign language research projects fit within one or more of these areas.

**FACTORS RELATING TO THE LANGUAGE**

Although research in the area of theoretical linguistics has lost influence as far as its applicability to foreign language teaching — we have, of course, Chomsky’s own famous statement: «I am, frankly, rather skeptical about the significance, for the teaching of languages, of such insights and understanding as have been attained in linguistics and psychology.» (Chomsky 1966: 29)— for a long period of time theoretical linguistics was the basic source discipline for foreign language studies and many experts working in applied linguistics recognize this debt: «...there is little doubt that there has been a definite and very substantial contribution from theoretical linguistics in determining what the object of FLT is. Scathing comments on contributions from theoretical linguistics should not obscure this fact.» (Van Els et al. 1984: 136). There are many areas relating to the study of language behavior and to the description of a language or of languages in general which still do not have definitive answers and which thus invite further research. Linguistics does not directly concern itself with language teaching and is definitely no longer the only source discipline which can guide language teachers, but undeniably...
research in linguistics influences the teaching of a language in many subtle and less subtle ways, even in a time when the practical aspects of learning a language predominate over the acquisition of the rules of a language. As Wilkins says,

...one could foresee the day when the variables of language learning are well enough understood for the study of general psychology to be less than essential. It is hard to imagine that languages can ever be taught without reference to the available language descriptions. In that case linguistics will always be a field of study relevant to language teaching. (Wilkins 1972: 215-16).

The decisions made by teachers, materials writers or creators of far-reaching educational policies are definitely sounder when influenced by a broad knowledge of linguistic matters. Wilkins sums up the relevance of linguistics for language teaching: «We do not take developments in linguistics and look for ways of applying them to teaching. Instead, we face problems in language teaching and in trying to solve them we look at the evidence from linguistics.» (Wilkins 1972: 228). It is possible to conceive of cases where specific linguistic information would be not only unimportant but even pernicious for language teaching, but on the whole from research on language we can expect to receive knowledge that in different ways and different degrees leads to more successful language teaching.

**FACTORS RELATING TO THE LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS**

If foreign language research in the 50's and 60's could be said to have centered around different aspects of language pedagogy, in the 70's interest focused around the language learning process, and there has been a veritable mushrooming of studies on first and second language acquisition. This area of research is particularly important because it is here that our center of interest becomes the language learner himself. This research corresponds to a growing trend in all educational studies towards student-centered approaches. As language learning is a mental process, research here is closely connected with psychology and psycho-linguistics.

In this area Van Els et al. distinguish an important division: the structure and order of the learning process and its speed and success. They point out that the former is usually similar in all cases despite learning variables and depends on general cognitive abilities, while the latter is greatly determined by individual differences relating to social and psychological factors affecting the language learner. (Van Els et al. 1984: 36). To the first group would belong, for example, the numerous studies on morpheme acquisition order and the fertile, if limited field of error analysis. As for the second group, one of the main aspects is the broad area concerned with the individual learner characteristics, which control how quickly and how well the language is learned. It seems that these learner characteristics are even more important than environmental factors (type of contact with the language) in determining language learning success. There has been a good deal of
research in this area, but since we are dealing with an aspect of a process that is not
directly observable, most subdivisions of this area still need further investigation before
truly valid conclusions can be drawn. Some of these factors are optimal age of the learn-
er, intelligence, aptitude and learning styles, attitude and motivation, personality traits
and learner strategies. The relationship between these learner traits and successful lan-
guage learning has been the subject of much research and, as McDonough advises, «if
this research effort does reach conclusions on the existence of individual student char-
acteristics that are favourably related to language learning, the language teacher needs
to know how this knowledge can be used.» (McDonough 1981: 125-26). Some of this knowl-
edge would probably be useful only to methodologists or materials writers, if at all, but it
can be of use in increasing the teacher’s awareness of the student as an individual, and
there is growing support from research for the hypothesis that we should teach not only
the language but also more efficient ways to learn a language.

One particularly fascinating aspect of language learning research is that classed
under the general heading of memory studies, which include a broad range of topics
such as retention, processing, storage, retrieval of information. Many disciplines, of
course, are concerned with memory studies, but work on verbal memory has been espe-
cially fertile and the connection with language learning is obvious. Earl Stevick in Me-

mory, Meaning and Method discusses the important areas of investigation dealing with
memory.

FACTORS RELATING TO THE LANGUAGE TEACHING PROCESS

Brumfit points out that research connected with education covers very extensive
ground but that «central in traditional educational systems is the study of method.»
(Brumfit 1980: 133). Research into methods, however, is plagued with difficulties because
there are so many different variables involved, and even though many of them can be
controlled, in a large scale project at least one of them is virtually uncontrollable: the teach-
er. Even though they may be using basically the same method, where different teach-
ers are involved, as they must be in a large-scale project, there is no way to eliminate
variables relating to the individual teacher (teaching style, enthusiasm, personality
traits, etc.) that can influence the final results. Of major research endeavors such as the
Pennsylvania Project, which compared the results of traditional and audio lingual
methods, Stern says that they «led to much controversy and did not, as had been expec-
ted of them, clinch the controversial issue to the satisfaction of the practitioners.» (Stern
1983: 67). Further on one possible, partial solution to this dilemma will be considered,
and the difficulties involved in researching methodology should not obscure its impor-
tance. In the past methodological innovation has been too often based on factors of an
intuitive nature, and no matter what the moving force —real desire to improve language
teaching, change for change’s sake or even vested interests which stand to gain from the
adoption of a new method— language teaching methodology is notably susceptible to
frequent variation, a fact that can be counteracted in part by the diffusion of the results of appropriate research.

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

Before looking at the last aspect of the language learning - language teaching process that we are considering in relationship to research questions, we might mention one research area dealing with a specific type of «environment»: that of the context of linguistic utterances. There is a growing belief that language should not be studied in isolation but rather in context. Van Els et al, consider «context» both from a linguistic and a social point or view:

... in most situations of language use, utterances will be preceded and followed by other utterances, resulting in a dialogic or monologic text;

in all situations of language use, specific social relations between speaker and hearer will guide the structure of these utterances. (Van Els et al. 1984:94)

Discourse analysis represents one realization of the complexity of linguistic analysis, as factors beyond the value of an utterance in isolation must be taken into account in order to arrive at the functional value of the language item in question. Discourse analysis places greater emphasis on the semantic content of expression, rather than only on the formal characteristics of language and is closely related to the communicative language philosophy. Hatch and Long (1980) and Larsen-Freeman (1980) have initiated research in discourse analysis, and this area is of considerable interest from an educational linguistics point of view, especially in that aspect which refers to classroom discourse. Also, it is very important for materials development in order to have teaching materials that reflect actual usage.

As for the environment in which language teaching occurs, as we indicated earlier, there are two ways in which the success of the teaching venture can be influenced. First of all, the attitudes towards the language which are prevalent in the society where the language is to be taught can contribute to the outcome. «A language with a high status», writes Strevens «will be learned and taught differently and with different rates of success from one which is disliked.» (Strevens 1978:50) Research on the importance of motivation for the learner has been carried out by Gardener and Lambert, establishing two types of motivation: integrative, where the learner has very positive feelings toward the linguistic community in question, and instrumental, which reflects the learner's belief that knowledge of the language will be of practical use (pass an exam, get better employment, etc.) In their work, basically in second language rather than foreign language learning situations, they found a predominance of integrative motivation among successful language learners but it would be interesting to investigate this question in a foreign language situation, since here one would suspect a shifting of importance towards instrumental motivation.
Second, and related to the societal attitudes towards the importance of learning languages or a particular language, is the official support, especially monetary, for language learning and the type of organization involved (planning general educational policy development, curricular studies, language teacher training and so forth). According to Stern, «the social context... which influences the learner and which has bearing on the degree of supportiveness supplied by the language environment affects the teacher as much as the learner and indirectly influences the educational treatment.» (Stern 1983:500)

As in other subject areas, the past few decades have seen a great deal of activity centering around foreign language curriculum development, and there have been many important studies conducted for this purpose. Curriculum development is something that many teachers engage in normally, even though it may be in an informal and unofficial manner; and in Britain during the past two decades much research energy has been dedicated to major curricular studies, albeit mainly dealing with the area of social sciences.

If we turn to the «how» of foreign language research, a quick look at research journals, such as Language Learning or at collections of readings, such as Hatch’s Second Language Acquisition, will show the great diversity of approaches. Inevitably, the nature of the research project will in large part determine the method. Methods for language acquisition research are basically the same as those found in research in the social sciences. First of all, data is traditionally collected by two means: direct or controlled observation. With direct observation data comes from behavior observed in a «natural» situation, which can be taken to be an informal acquisition setting or a formal learning environment. For certain aspects of language learning this may be the only way to get information (for example, on communication strategies used in a real communicative setting or on classroom language.) However, there are certain disadvantages to this type of data collection, such as the difficulty involved in carrying out the observation which is often time-consuming and may need to be completed by video or at least a tape recording. In addition, much extraneous information frequently makes it difficult to focus attention on the point in question, as non-relevant factors are not filtered out.

With controlled observation data proceeds from experiments set up artificially. Research done in this manner is designed to show how one or more particular variables affect the learning process. Controlled observation focuses on specific points of interest and can often be done with smaller groups, giving us more manageable data. However, it does not take place in a natural setting, and we cannot always be sure if what is observed would happen in the «real world» of language learning. Direct observation is often used as a base for producing a hypothesis about language learning which is then tested under controlled conditions.

Research studies may also be classified according to temporal factors. Longitudinal research is a diachronic process which deals with recording the behavior of the subject(s) over a certain period of time. Changes in behavior or stages in the learning pro-
cess are to be detected. The time involved may vary but the general scheme is $A_1$, $A_2$, $A_3$... where $A$ refers to the subject(s) and 1, 2, 3... refer to the different moments of observation of the subject(s). On the other hand, cross-sectional research designs collect data synchronically, from a one-time sample. The scheme would be $A_1$, $B_1$, $C_1$... where $A$, $B$, $C$... are different subjects at one moment in time. Van Els et al. also mention a quasi-longitudinal design where «cross-sectional samples of language behaviour of different groups of language learners at different stages of development are collected and compared.» (Van Els et al. 1984:71)

A further distinction in the design refers to the informants: case studies or large groups. Case studies are «neater» to work with but results may not always be generalized.

When we enter the realm of «who» should engage in foreign language research, we come to a question of vital importance for the future of the language teaching profession. If research does not improve practice, it is done in vain. As research which is carried out in the medical sciences serves to increase the medical practitioner's ability to cure his patients, so should foreign language research in some way contribute to a more successful language teaching experience. One of the main ways this can occur is related to the «who» of the research question.

The history of research in the field of education is relatively short, and it has inevitably been influenced by the different views of education itself. Approaches that can be classified as rationalist or positivist have predominated until the last decades, and research has been within the framework of the paradigm «process/product». According to this orientation, the application of the experimental methods should give us information about what kind of teaching leads to the most efficient results. Then if we give the results of this type of research to the teachers, so that they can apply them in their classrooms, we will have improved teaching. This is an academic type of research, carried out by professional researchers; it leads to a type of education in which an agent (the teacher) receives information from above (the researchers) and applies it to some passive subjects (the students). (Elliott 1984:6) It sees reality as unique and stable; it can be studied only by looking at the visible phenomena and by looking with scientific exactitude. But obviously an effervescent classroom is not the same thing as a sample, let us say, of muscular tissue which the scientist analyzes. In the field of educational research it is finally being accepted that there is not only one type of reality, that the positivistic scientific method is not the only road towards the development and improvement of the teaching process. It has often tended to fragment reality, artificially simplifying its structure. It deals only with generalizations, when what confronts the teacher is a concrete and unique situation. It spreads the idea of truths in which one has to believe, instead of attitudes of criticism and search. It takes initiative away from both teacher and student.

In education in recent decades there has developed a new type of research that in one way is as old as teaching itself but in another is quite revolutionary.
In the renovated type of education prominent today, the place occupied by research is very prominent. Stenhouse speaks of how our «realities» in the field of education are often very distant from our «intentions», and he affirms that «the gap between our ideas and aspirations and our attempts to operationalize them... can be closed only by adopting a research and development approach to one’s own teaching.» (Stenhouse 1981:3)

That is, the most efficient way to improve the learning-teaching process on an individual and a collective level is by means of research and the implantation of what we discover in that research. But, along with purely academic research done by professional researchers, the movement known as action research, first developed in the United States in the 1950's and now with world-wide participation, affirms that the teachers themselves should carry out educational research. In Stenhouse’s words, «It is not enough that teachers' work should be studied; they need to study it themselves.» (Stenhouse 1981:143)

This alternative form of educational research has experienced a steady growth in relationship with the research and curriculum development movements created by Stenhouse, Bruner and Elliott, among others. It is an answer to the previous positivist model and it fits in with what has been called the hermeneutical, naturalistic or ecological approach to teaching. This new perspective acknowledges that research may be applied to many interrelated realities, including the subjective one, and takes into account the physical and psychosocial aspects, not merely the didactic efficiency of the teacher using some method in a laboratory situation. The object of research —the classroom— is a complex, flowing reality which must be studied by qualitative methods also and which can lead only to provisional and evolving results. It begins with classroom practice and, through case studies, can develop into theory, not vice versa.

In the past ten years in the United Kingdom the action research movement has extended rapidly throughout all educational circles. It came to the fore as a way to apply and then to evaluate the new curricular trends in which it was essential for the teacher to adopt a position of neutrality and dialogue. One prominent area has been that of evaluation research for which Elliott has developed a triangulation process for evaluating the behavior of the teacher in the classroom with the aim of making him aware of his actions and their consequences for his students.

There are two important implications in Elliott’s work: the teachers are the researchers and they carry out their research in the place where the particular practical problems occur: the classroom. Action research has radically changed the focus, and if we accept that the student is going to take advantage more readily of what is most relevant for him, we could apply the same idea to the teacher. Gail McCutcheon says: «A teacher doing action research has the opportunity to pose questions that are relevant to him or her and to seek information that will help the teacher understand his or her situation more fully.» (McCutcheon 1981:188) In this way, research is taken as an integral part of the teacher's work and not as an activity reserved for «experts».
Ray Shostak summarizes the basic process for action research: «(a) formulating questions, (b) generating hypotheses, (c) testing hypotheses, and (d) using conclusions to formulate new questions and inform practice.» (Shostak 1981:155) The incorporation and practice of this process with the necessary variants in the training period or in in-service training can help teachers to establish the habit of searching for ways to improve their own teaching behavior, something that good teachers have always done, whether with a formal organizational scheme or merely by themselves as they stop to reflect about their own teaching. It is a research method that motivates, because the teacher sees its utility; it incorporates concrete problems that face him in his classroom.

Action research is a global, integrative movement which is not limited to just one field but rather provides basic schemes which can be applied according to the discipline and the particular case to be studied. In this sense it favors an interdisciplinary contact and the use of similar tactics in different areas, something not always possible with other research models. Though in action research much of the most well-known effort has been in the area of the social sciences (HCP, the Ford project, MACOS), implications for foreign language teaching are not lacking. Foreign language professionals are getting more and more involved. Michael Breem notes that «the current growth of classroom-orientated research —and especially the undertaking of action research by teachers in their own classrooms— will tell us much more than we presently know about the actual nature and use of syllabuses in the language class.» (Breem 1987:172) He is certainly not alone in his recognition of the importance of action research for foreign language teaching. Stern also has a similar point of view:

The practitioner should think of himself involved in research not only as the recipient of the findings of a study relatively remote from his sphere of activity. Nothing is more unproductive than the cliche of the researcher as someone in an «ivory tower». The practitioner is best thought of as a participant in research... the tasks and the problems he faces and the questions he raises as they present themselves in the language class are those that should eventually be the subject of investigation... In other situations, the practitioner and the researcher will co-operate in an enquiry. Finally, what is more important for the practitioner than «applying» research is to develop a research approach or a research attitude.» (Stern 1983:67)

This research approach to one's own teaching is a key point in action research that can be applied very productively to language teaching. The communicative attitude —teaching with an action research perspective is often referred to as being a type of communicative action— has a direct relationship with the philosophy of the main English language teaching approach at present. Bunge's research model asks for more breadth and less precision in the same way that Brumfit looks for more emphasis on fluency and less on accuracy in English teaching. The idea that we find throughout action research about the importance of motivating the student by means of a curriculum
relevant to his interests is also stressed by many foreign language methodologists; the communicative orientation, for example, tries to relate English teaching to the student's reality and needs.

It is not difficult to think of concrete ways to apply action research in foreign language teaching. One possible project would be to investigate whether the thematic and functional content of the texts one is using really corresponds to the areas of interest of the students working with them and, if not, what these areas actually are. When programming a course, there may be little margin for change as far as the structures; but the semantic and functional orientation can vary a good deal, with some options much better than others because of their greater relevance for the students involved.

Given the importance—and the difficulty—of mastering the lexical aspect of language, a teacher might feel that he should experiment with different tactics to facilitate the assimilation of vocabulary. Starting from his own speculations or perhaps from one of the many suggestive ideas in Stevick's *Memory, Meaning and Method*, he could develop ways to help his students learn vocabulary more efficiently.

Another project could be carried out if the teacher notices that his students do not participate enough. He could plan to investigate the reasons and to look for solutions, focusing his attention upon two areas: that of his attitude as a teacher, which perhaps does not invite participation for some reason, and that of the use of types of materials or activities which do not stimulate the student.

Any teacher who is truly a professional is interested in evaluating the quality of his teaching, and action research provides a well-developed framework for feedback and evaluation.

If many action research projects in language teaching were carried out and if there were channels established for them to be properly recorded and communicated to other practitioners and researchers, valuable insights could be gained regarding the language learning and, especially, the language teaching process. If data could be received on methodological aspects, for example, from enough different sources and situations, there might be a possibility of making less shaky generalizations about methods.

We have mentioned the importance for action research of the work done in the classrooms instead of in laboratories or other environments for professional research. But to affirm that theoretical research is not all important is not equivalent to rejecting it completely. The classroom researcher can receive valuable suggestions both from case studies and from laboratory research. There are numerous ways to use professional research in the classroom without discouraging the research spirit that should be developed in the teacher. The goal is to establish an on-going dialogue between the available theoretical contributions and the practical reality in the classroom, a dialogue that should be started and supported by those who are responsible for the initial training of the teacher.
The task of learning the use of research in the classroom is not a totally simple one. Although the proponents of action research maintain that any teacher can carry it out, this does not mean, in Nixon's words

that it can be undertaken lightly. Action research is an intellectually demanding mode of enquiry, which prompts serious and often uncomfortable questions about classroom practice. It requires a willingness on the part of teachers to learn about their own classes and a desire to develop themselves professionally. (Nixon 1981:5)

Action research could possibly be confused with a reliance on the intuitive to inform educational change. One must not forget the importance of the development of theoretical research for language learning and language teaching. The two are mutually compatible and, if we have pointed out the importance of theoretical research for the classroom researchers, it is also true that work done in the classroom is obviously of much use to professional researchers. And, although we cannot expect significant and wide-spread short-term results, experts like Stenhouse affirm that the road leading to the definitive improvement of education passes through the development of research by the teachers. As Nixon has said,

a component on the practicalities of action research, if included in all initial teacher education courses, would help to turn the tide. It would also be a way of presenting research as a dynamic process with which the teacher is expected to engage, as a continuing dialogue between theory and classroom practice. (Nixon 1981:196)

Everyone involved in language teaching should be interested in what can be learned from foreign language research, whether it be to gain theoretical understanding, practical applications or a combination of both. Furthermore, it is to be hoped that an increasing number of teachers will also become aware of the importance of carrying out research on their own.

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