III. Language Acqusition and the German Language Classroom

Overview

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Teaching foreign language courses has long been considered "the cinderella of staff duty" in Australian universities (Leal 1991:137[108]),* a chore far removed from the esoteric realm of scholarship. But the emergence of second language acquisition research as an academic discipline has opened up a rich field of enquiry into the processes involved in language learning, a field which has seen an increasing number of contributions, particularly in the form of empirical studies, from researchers who are committed language teachers (Diehl 2002). Research of this kind is crucial for testing theories, but is also has the potential to contribute to improvements in foreign language pedagogy. The papers in this section discuss empirical studies based on real-life classroom settings, involving learners as diverse as school children in Geneva and Australian tertiary students. Since the results of these studies have important implications for the way German is taught, not only but also in Australian universities, it seems appropriate to introduce this section with a brief glimpse at the history of German language teaching in Australian tertiary institutions.

The University of Sydney was the first Australian university to offer courses in German (and French) from 1853, followed by Melbourne University in 1884; soon afterwards both universities established "Chairs in Literature, whose incumbents were expected to teach English, French and German Languages and Literature" (Barko 1996a:6). It was not until after the Second World War that chairs in German Language and Literature were established at the two universities. The post-war period saw a dramatic expansion of the tertiary sector and the number of German

[108] According to Diehl (2002), this attitude is also prevalent in tertiary foreign language departments in European countries.

* Full bibliographical references for this section appear on pages 167-170.

departments grew to twelve (Schulz 1976:106). By that time, modern language departments in Australian universities generally followed the "Language-and-Literature model, where the balance of the two components tends to tip towards the latter, language being seen as the utilitarian servant of literature-the-mistress" (Barko 1996a:7; cf. Tisdell 1997:95).

The late sixties and seventies brought dramatic changes to the tertiary foreign language sector, notably the removal of compulsory foreign language study as a prerequisite for university entry and the resulting drop in enrolments for both secondary and tertiary foreign language courses. At the same time the range of languages offered in both sectors grew to include other European languages like Modern Greek, as well as Asian languages such as Japanese. Since university students could no longer be expected to have studied a foreign language at school, tertiary German and other language departments introduced introductory courses for beginners, with the result that language courses generally, particularly those at elementary level, began to dominate the departments' offerings, at least in terms of contact hours and student enrolments (cf.Tisdell 1997: 96). That, and the emergence of "background studies" as well as or instead of literature courses contributed to the demise of the traditional language and literature model (Barko 1996b:7; Schulz 1976:109 f.). Although the practice of language teaching underwent great changes at that time, such as the introduction of language laboratories and later the influence of the communicative approach, it was not regarded as a "high-level intellectual activity" (Quinn cited in Barko 1996b:7) and "entrusted to junior, untenured and casual staff (generally of the female gender)" (Barko 1996a:7). It is interesting to note that scholars like Michael Clyne, Manfred Pienemann and Howard Nicholas, who spent some of their professional lives attached to tertiary German departments, went on to make their most significant contributions not in German Studies, but in applied linguistics and language acquisition research (cf. McNamara 2001).

By the mid-nineties, German was taught to approximately 2500 students at 15 tertiary institutions (Djité 1994:120). The students surveyed by Ammon in 1987 nominated a range of reasons for studying German, but their strongest motive was "communication with German-speaking

persons abroad" (Fernandez et al 1994:77, cf. Ammon 1991:35,45). However, the authors of the Leal Report found that academic staff teaching German regarded research in literature most highly, whereas language learning and teaching was the research area most valued by Japanese staff (Leal et al 1991:135), a situation also observed by Harting in his comparative study of German and Japanese departments at UNSW (Harting 2003).

A decade later, German departments are increasingly being amalgamated with other foreign language and in some cases linguistics departments to form larger academic units. While this development may lead to the loss of a distinctive identity for academics teaching German Studies, including the loss of German-speaking administrative staff, it offers new opportunities for collaboration between teachers and researchers from previously separate foreign language departments. Language acquisition research is one area which can benefit from collaborative projects, and given the pressures on researchers to apply for large national grants, there may be pragmatic as well as scholarly reasons for studies involving several languages.

In summing up 150 years of tertiary German teaching in Australia, Barko's image of the spiral symbolising the "simultaneous phenomena of repetition and advancement" (Barko 1996a:7) seems most appropriate. One regrettable sign of repetition is the current renewal of the debate "over the intellectual usefulness of language learning as part of an academic education," a debate in which those who argue that language learning is "just a skill" (Liddicoat et al 1997:20) deny the many cognitive and cultural dimensions involved in the acquisition of another language.

On the positive side, the geographical distance between Australia and the German-speaking countries is no longer the obstacle deplored by Schulz in the seventies (1976:112f.): thanks to the internet, Australians now have access to a wide range of up-to-date authentic German-language materials, travel to Europe is cheaper and faster than ever, and more and more students are able to include a semester or two of overseas university study in their degree programmes. Obviously this phenomenon,

especially the availability of the internet and other new media, has a profound influence on foreign language pedagogy, not only in the sense that teachers need to learn to use the new technology to enhance their teaching; it is equally important for them to understand and harness the autonomy their students gain from having easier and more plentiful access to the target language.

The autonomy of language learners and the fact that they follow their own paths towards mastery of the target language, irrespective of how they are taught, is the central theme linking the papers in this section. Put simply, that is the main finding of the pioneering DiGS (Deutsch in Genfer Schulen) project, discussed here by Boss and Diehl. On the basis of the largest corpus of data for German as a foreign language, Diehl and her colleagues investigated the way Francophone school children acquired German word order, verb morphology and case assignment, and the learning strategies they used in the process. (Interestingly, the strategy teachers tend to suspect most often, namely transfer from the learners' first language, seemed to occur only in the area of word order.) The project is remarkable not only in its scope, but also because it successfully explored an important research area as well as serving a practical purpose; it was designed to contribute to a review of the German curriculum in Geneva schools and involved a unique cooperation between researchers, teachers and public officials. Because of this dual objective, the main publication of the project team (Diehl et al. 2000) is as relevant for teachers as it is for researchers (cf. also Boss and Jansen 2003a, 2003b).

Jansen's paper provides the background to the DiGS project by surveying the main trends in international research studies on stages of acquisition in German as a second or foreign language. It traces the impetus for classroom-based research from the earlier studies into the natural acquisition of the language by guest workers in Germany, notably the influential ZISA (Zweitspracherwerb italienischer und spanischer Arbeiter) project (Clahsen Meisel, Pienemann 1983), which had shown that German word order is acquired in a universal sequence of incremental steps. The paper contains a detailed description of the acquisitional stages in German word order and discusses the possible reasons why the

sequence found by the DiGS team differs from that in earlier studies involving oral data. (On the question whether inversion precedes or follows verb-final position in subordinate clauses see also Boss 2004 and Lund 2004.)

While the two previous papers report on empirical language acquisition studies, Schneider uses the framework of motivational research for her study on contextual factors affecting German language courses in the Australian tertiary sector. Based on data from a survey of students of German at Monash University in 2002, she discusses the students' responses on their language background, their reasons for studying German and expectations of the course, comparing these responses with the teaching syllabus. Like Ammon (1991), Schneider finds the students are mainly motivated to learn the language for the purpose of communication, an aspiration which contrasts starkly with the course programme with its strong emphasis on teaching and testing grammatical knowledge, a situation which is perhaps not untypical of Australian tertiary German courses generally. But Schneider also states that despite their preference for learning to speak, her informants mentioned grammar practice as the language activity they undertook most frequently outside the classroom; as well as responding to the emphasis on grammar in the course, the students, according to the author, felt grammar exercises were something they could control. Maybe a similar tendency causes teachers to turn to grammar practice when their students cannot produce the structures they were taught, as Boss and Diehl state.

What can teachers and course designers for German as a foreign language learn from the research findings discussed in the three papers? The principal common message that emerges is the need for a more learner-centred approach, which Schneider would like to see formalised through individual language learning portfolios, tracking the learners' strength and weaknesses and encouraging them to take control of the learning process. The more radical recommendations made by Jansen, Boss and Diehl involve a rethinking of the way grammar is taught, with a syllabus based on stages of acquisition rather than the sequence in which grammatical structures are normally presented in textbooks. This should

not involve using simplified, unauthentic language forms, since "unlearnable structures" (Jansen) like inversion can be introduced before students are expected to master them; it does however, call for a more complex approach to error correction, one that differentiates between errors within and those beyond the individual learners' stage of acquisition.

Each of these recommendations needs to be refined and tested in realistic settings, and despite budget cuts and increasing class sizes, tertiary foreign language departments still offer the best environment for classroom-based research, often carried out by researchers who are also language teachers (cf. Diehl 2002). It is to be hoped that the papers in this section will contribute to a growing body of research projects of this type in the future.