

## **FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING – AN INTERVIEW WITH NINA SPADA**

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### **ReVEL – What are the most important contributions of Modern Linguistics to Foreign Language Teaching?**

**Spada** – One of the earliest and most significant contributions of modern linguistics to foreign (and second) language teaching was structural linguistics which when combined with the behaviourist theory of learning led to the development of the audio-lingual method. This method, considered to be the first “scientific” method of language teaching dominated the field for several decades prior to the arrival of Chomsky’s “linguistic revolution” in the late 60’s and the introduction of Universal Grammar (UG). The idea that there exists a universal grammar of human languages originated with Chomsky’s view of first language (L1) acquisition. He was looking for an explanation of the fact that virtually all children learn language at a time in their cognitive development when they experience difficulty grasping other kinds of knowledge that appear to be far less complex than language. He argued that this could not be accomplished by mere exposure to samples of the language in the environment because the language to which children are exposed is incomplete and sometimes “degenerate”. Furthermore, children appear to be able to acquire their L1 without any systematic corrective feedback or instruction. Chomsky thus concluded that children must have an innate language faculty – a mechanism they are born with that enables them to “crack the code” of the language they will eventually become native speakers of via a process of hypothesis formulation and testing.

Although Chomsky is not particularly interested in second language learning or teaching, his work has influenced both. One particular view of second language learning that shares some of the assumptions of the UG approach is Krashen's (1982) Monitor Theory. On the basis of research findings in second language (L2) acquisition, Krashen argued that because L2 learning is similar to L1 learning, efforts are needed to create environments in L2 classrooms that more closely approximate the conditions of L1 acquisition. He hypothesized that if L2 learners were exposed to "comprehensible input" and were provided with opportunities to focus on meaning and messages rather than grammatical forms and accuracy, they would be able to acquire their second language in much the same way as L1 learners. In this way, Monitor Theory provided considerable support for second (and foreign) language teaching, particularly, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the movement away from a focus on language forms to a focus on communication and meaning.

Another important contribution of Modern Linguistics to foreign language teaching and to CLT in particular, can be found in the theory of communicative competence proposed by the sociolinguist, Dell Hymes in the early 70's. This theory was based on the claim that knowing a language includes much more than knowledge of the rules of grammar (i.e. linguistic competence). Hymes drew attention to the importance of knowledge of the rules of language use (i.e. communicative competence). This view led to several developments in the field of CLT including the creation of communicative curricula, language teaching materials and methodologies. Since the 1980's, CLT in its various forms and interpretations has continued to dominate the field of second language teaching and increasingly foreign language teaching as well. Of course, linguistics is just one discipline that has influenced foreign language teaching. There are several others that have also played an important role including psychology and education.

**ReVEL – Is it important for a Foreign Language teacher to have a background in linguistics?**

**Spada** – I consider a background in linguistics to be very important to foreign language teachers if the linguistics training is sufficiently broad to include knowledge

about the formal, functional, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic aspects of language. The linguistically aware teacher should not only understand how language works but also how the student struggles with language so that she/he can be sensitive to errors and other features of the learner's foreign language development. Thus, I believe that it's important for linguistics training to also include knowledge about how languages are learned. Of course, foreign language teachers should not only possess a sophisticated knowledge of language but also the ability to make this knowledge accessible and comprehensible to the learner. Often this type of knowledge is obtained in pedagogical grammar courses that are typically offered in applied linguistics rather than linguistics programs.

In the words of a well-known applied linguist, "it seems reasonable to expect that teachers should know their subject [ie. language]. This knowledge provides the grounds for their authority, and gives warrant to the idea that they are practising a profession. Without this specialist knowledge, they have no authority, and no profession.... The least we should expect of teachers, then, is that they should know their subject." (Widdowson, 2002, pp.67)

### **ReVEL – How much can a teacher learn analyzing students' errors and mistakes?**

**Spada** – As Corder (1967) stated in his seminal paper on error analysis; "when learners produce 'correct sentences', they may simply be repeating something they have already heard; when they produce sentences which differ from the target language, we may assume that these sentences reflect the learners' current understanding of the rules and patterns of that language". I think that learners' errors are a very important source of information to the foreign language teacher. They provide a window into what is going on "inside the learner's mind" and can be helpful to foreign language teachers in several ways. For example, by paying attention to learners' errors, teachers can diagnose what types of errors learners are making and then decide what to do about them. Errors also provide an indication of a learner's progress and thus can be helpful in assessment and evaluation. The occurrence of a larger number of errors than expected in an activity can indicate that

the activity is too difficult. Alternatively, fewer errors of a specific kind may signal to the teacher that learning has taken place. Thus, a teacher can learn a great deal from analyzing students' errors and mistakes.

The ability to notice and analyze learners' errors requires a solid knowledge of the language being taught. Knowledge of the learner's first language can also be very helpful. This latter type of knowledge may be a more realistic goal in the teaching of foreign (as opposed to second) languages where typically most of the learners share a first language.

### **ReVEL – What would you say is the best age for children to start a Foreign Language Education?**

**Spada** – Just about everyone would argue that “younger is better” when it comes to learning a foreign language in schools. However, both experience and research have shown that older learners can attain high, if not native levels of proficiency in a foreign language. So, the answer to the question: “*when is the best time for children to begin learning a foreign language*” depends on several factors, the two most important being: 1) the goals and expectations of an instructional program and 2) the context in which the instruction occurs.

If the goal for learning/teaching a foreign language is to obtain the highest level of second language skills, the level at which a second language speaker is indistinguishable from a native speaker, there is support for the argument that “earlier is better”. This support, found in the critical period hypothesis literature, is based on the claim that biological and maturational factors constrain language learning beyond a certain age.

However, achieving native-like mastery of a foreign language is not a goal for all language learners in all contexts. In fact, most foreign language learners are primarily interested in obtaining a basic communicative ability in the foreign language because their native language will remain the primary language. In cases such as these, it may be more efficient to begin foreign language learning later. Research has shown that

when learners receive only a few hours of foreign language instruction a week, learners who start later (for example at ages 10-12 instead of ages 6-8) often catch up with those who began earlier. Therefore, one or two hours a week will not produce very advanced second language speakers, no matter how young they were when they began.

**ReVEL – What books can you suggest for Foreign Language teachers who want to know more about Applied Linguistics and Second/Foreign Language Teaching?**

**Spada** – Brown, H.D. (1994). *Principles of language learning and teaching* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.

Candlin, C. & Mercer, N. (Eds.) (2001). *English language teaching in its social context: A reader*. New York: Routledge.

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Lightbown, P.M. & Spada, N. (1999) *How languages are learned* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Trappes-Lomax, H. & Ferguson, G. (2002). *Language in language teacher education*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

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