

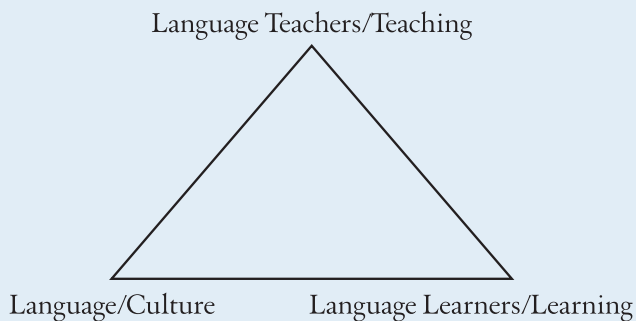
Reflections

This section presents contemporary commentary
on articles previously published in *English Teaching Forum*.

From Unity to Diversity... to Diversity within Unity

BY DIANE LARSEN-FREEMAN

For the 25th anniversary issue of *English Teaching Forum*, published in 1987, I wrote about the diversification of the language teaching field. My point then was that during the preceding years from 1962 to 1987, the language teaching field had diversified: Where earlier there had been a unified approach to language teaching, by 1987, many options existed. Today, as I write on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of *Forum*, I perceive a different pattern. I see diversity *within* unity, not as an alternative to it. I begin this article by briefly summarizing the main theme of my 1987 article. Next, I turn to the triangle that I used then to depict the language teaching field. In each of the three angles of the triangle, I placed the major categories of language/culture, language learners/learning, and language teachers/teaching.



In this article, I revisit each of the angles, making observations that support my contention that today there is diversity within unity. I conclude by stepping back from this analysis of the field and by stating why I feel that the theme that I have chosen for my article in this 50th anniversary issue is important to us all.

Then and Now

In 1987, the major theme of my article was that the language teaching field had gone from a period of unity in 1962 to a period of diversity in 1987. I supported this

theme by pointing to the shifts that had taken place in each of the angles of the triangle. In the learners/learning angle, where at one time habit formation was the dominant view of language learning, in subsequent years several competing theories were proposed to explain language acquisition: innatism, cognitivism (initially, rule formation and, later, the setting of parameters on principles of universal grammar), imitation of frequently occurring sequences of words, and interactionism. In the language angle, I pointed to the variety of syllabus types that were being implemented. While structural syllabi still seemed commonplace, there were other options: notional-functional, topical, situational, procedural, competency-based, text-based, content-based syllabi, or some combination of these. In the teachers/teaching angle, I noted the diversity of methods that were being practiced in 1987. To represent the diversity, I singled out five “innovative methods”: the Silent Way, Suggestopedia, Community Language Learning, the Comprehension Approach, and the Communicative Approach. I made the point that at the time none of them had dominated the field to the degree that Audiolingualism had before them.

I explored other facets of the field as well. All this variety, which I have just selectively recounted, I proposed to support my theme that the language teaching field had moved from unity to diversity. In the present article, my theme is different. I believe that diversity in our field remains, but it has a different relationship to unity. The diversity is not in opposition to the unity, but rather can be located within it. To elaborate on this new theme, I revisit the three angles of the triangle.

Language/Culture

Language has been seen to be a rule-governed system. While this view of language remains, more recently, many more linguists have subscribed to a view of language as a pastiche of patterns. Some are socially situated sentences or

utterances, such as the following: “Can I come in?” “Are you ready?” “He’s busy right now.” “Have some more.” Others are lexicalized sentence stems, which start off with a more or less fixed pattern, but which are open ended, such as “I am writing/emailing/calling to say...” Still others are entirely phrasal, such as “of course” and “as a matter of fact.” While some of these are accounted for by grammatical rules, not all are; for example, the phrase “by and large,” where a preposition is followed by a conjunction, and then an adjective, is not the product of English rules of grammar. Speakers of a given language have a repertoire of such language patterns or chunks, numbering in the tens of thousands (Pawley and Syder 1983). As the examples indicate, some of these patterns are fixed, but many also allow for variation. Knowledge of these many patterns constitutes a speaker’s language resources and allows the speaker to produce and understand language fluently in real time.

This characterization of language has been bolstered by access to the large digitized corpora that exist these days. Certainly, in the past, linguists have made use of collections of language utterances. However, using computers to store and search vast databases makes it possible to discover and investigate patterns, which traditional grammars and descriptions of language may have overlooked. In so doing, corpus linguists have uncovered the largely phraseological nature of English. Mining the data of electronic corpora shows us common collocations and their “semantic prosody” (Sinclair 1991) or the negative or positive associations with such patterns. For example, corpus analysis reveals that when the English word *border* is followed by *on*, the phrase “bordered/bordering on” can have a geographic reference, but it is also used often in reporting an undesirable state, e.g., “bordering on arrogance” (Schmitt 2005). Stepping back from the individual patterns, we become aware of how much of our language use is conventionalized. By this, I mean that grammar rules may generate an infinite number of sentences, but only a few of the combinations are actually used. For example, it would be customary to propose marriage by asking your beloved “Will you marry me?” You would not likely say “I desire you to become married to me.” And, although perfectly grammatical, the probability of your proposal being successful would likely diminish if you were to say “Your becoming my spouse is what I want” (Pawley and Syder 1983)!

The shift from conceiving of language as an internal rule-governed system to language as patterns-in-use has had profound consequences. Language is not produced by simply filling in the slots of a syntactic pattern with lexical items. Lexis and grammar are intertwined. Where once it was thought that language competence was a homogenized

unitary entity, it is now theorized that one’s language resources are composed of thousands of language chunks: phrases, lexicalized sentence stems, sentences/utterances, which can be arrayed along a continuum of fixity to flexibility. Or, in other words, while we still might speak of “the English language” as if it were a unified thing, we see from closer inspection that it might be better to conceive of a language as affording its speakers a variety of forms with which to construct meaning in a way appropriate to their purposes. In this vein we speak of a speaker’s (heterogeneous) language resources rather than a homogeneous internal grammar. We also acknowledge that speakers’ language resources are much more mutable and individual than previously thought as a result of each speaker’s unique ongoing experience in using language. In other words, speakers’ language resources are stable, but they are always open to change. Of course, there is enough overlap among the resources of various speakers to achieve mutual intelligibility; nonetheless, speakers have their own unique resources or idiolects. The enactment of their resources is a dynamic process, one that has been termed “grammaring” (Larsen-Freeman 2003) or “languaging” (Swain 2006).

The use of corpora has also highlighted the importance of culture. When we focus on language in use, rather than language as an abstract formal system, we see it rooted in the context and culture of the local speech community to which the participants belong. Given the increasing social and economic mobility of many people these days, English has become an international lingua franca that is not really owned by any one group of speakers. Within a globalized community, then, any attempt to establish one model of English as the “target,” be it a native variety or an indigenized variety (Indian English, Nigerian English, etc.), is problematic (Jenkins 2000; Seidlhofer 2001). Certainly, within a multilingual context, in which English is the lingua franca among non-native speakers, standard norms are becoming less relevant (Wei 2010).

Attempting to define stable ELF [English as a lingua franca] models, whether linguistic or cultural, with which to replace the traditional ‘native’ model, seems to be going against the richness of EIL [English as an international language] in a globalized community, characterized by infinite variety. Lingua-cultural identities seem to be increasingly multiple rather than single and unitary...” (Pro-dromou 2008, 13)

To summarize so far, gone is the notion of a homogenized language competence and a monocultural identity. In its

place is the recognition that one speaker's resources overlap with others, but they are also distinctive. In other words, within unity, there is diversity.

Learners/Learning

Now moving on to the second angle—that of learners and learning—it is fair to say that the population of language learners is also not as homogeneous as it once was. First of all, today there are far more second language users of English than there are native speakers, and the former number is expanding (Graddol 2006). This surge in the number of English learners can be attributed to the status of English as an international language, and it has been fueled by the aforementioned mobility of populations around the world in search of jobs or better living conditions. It is also attributable to the fact that parents want their children to have opportunities that they believe a knowledge of English will provide. Parents' aspirations for their children and the desire of ministries of education for a populace that can compete on the world stage have contributed to the tendency to begin English language instruction at earlier and earlier ages. Then, too, in English-speaking countries, greater dispersion of immigrant populations from cities into suburbs and the countryside has meant that many classroom teachers, not necessarily ones educated to teach English, have, for the first time, large numbers of English language learners in their classrooms. At a further point along the age spectrum, increasing numbers of international students are pursuing higher education in English-speaking countries.

However, language learners differ not only in age, but also along a number of dimensions. Where at one time, individual difference research was confined to investigating such obvious factors as language aptitude and learner motivation, now individual differences, hypothesized to account for differential success among learners, number over one hundred. Even a general trait such as "intelligence" is seen as multiple (Gardner 1999). The same holds for language learners' various multiple identities: as a man or woman, adult or child, monolingual or bilingual, etc. It is clear that each learner is unique. Such an observation underscores a critical question in the field of language learning and language education: To what extent is it possible to make generalizations about learners apart from the circumstances of, and reason for, their learning? As Kramsch (2002, 4) has put it:

It is no longer sufficient to talk about "individual differences" in SLA [second language acquisition] against the backdrop of the universal learner. Difference and variation itself have moved to the center of language acquisition research.

While of course there are some commonalities among learners, for example, that a learner's language background influences the way he or she thinks and speaks a language (Slobin 1996), it is also the case that each learner maps the L2 learning territory somewhat differently. Indeed, researching the developing patterns of learner language makes it clear that learners chart their own paths (Larsen-Freeman 2006). For this reason, I have suggested that we should bear in mind that we are not just teaching language; we are teaching learners (Larsen-Freeman 2003).

Moving on to the category of learning in the second angle, given what I have written above about the patterned nature of a speaker's language resources, it follows then that language acquisition is not seen to be a process of acquiring rules, which then get applied, but as the emergence of variegated language resources from interrelated patterns of experience, social interaction, and cognitive mechanisms, mechanisms such as noticing and remembering.

Thus, instead of seeing language learning as solely being a process of hypothesis testing and revision, as befits a rule formation view of language, patterns are said to emerge as learners use the language (in a bottom-up fashion). The social dimension, which had been minimized in previous accounts of language learning, occupies its rightful place from the perspective of emergentism.

As speakers interact, they co-adapt; they adjust their language to each other. Language is a complex adaptive system (Ellis and Larsen-Freeman 2006; 2009). Through language use and co-adaptation among speakers, frequently occurring patterns get noticed, remembered, and incorporated into learners' language resources. The exposure and opportunity to use formulae in interaction are key components in their acquisition (Wray 2002). Of course, exposure and opportunity will vary from learning environment to learning environment, accounting for language variation among speakers. Indeed, when we entertain a view of language as a complex adaptive system, we recognize that every use of language changes the language resources of the learner/user. The changed resources are then available for other members of the speech community to adopt and to adapt (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008).

It would not be in keeping with my theme, however, to nominate emergentism as the only means of acquiring another language. Certainly, with language as complex as it is, it is doubtful that there is a single means of learning it, and this is surely the case, especially for older learners, who likely rely more on explicit declarative knowledge of the language than what results from reliance on an implicit process such as the one I have just described. Thus, any view of language learning will have to acknowledge the

contribution of multiple processes (e.g., Gagné and Medsker 1996).

Teachers/Teaching

When it comes to explicit language teaching, the picture has also changed. Moving on to the last angle of the triangle, then, it can be said that today there is a greater awareness of teachers as multidimensional beings themselves. First of all, teachers have their own individual experiences with learning languages to draw on. Then, too, teachers are learners themselves. Indeed, teacher learning has become a major subarea of the field, with much research being conducted on how teachers learn to teach (Tedick 2005; Burns and Richards 2009). How teachers develop in their understanding of teaching is viewed less as their applying theories from related disciplines and more as their constructing their own understandings by participating in “communities of practice” (Lave and Wenger 1991) with other teachers and formulating their own theories through such interactions, filtered through their own experiences (Johnson 2006). Because of the situated nature of these local theories, it is recognized that teachers’ views of teaching may vary considerably from one teacher to another. What is important is for teachers to have their own sense of plausibility (Prabhu 1990), their own understanding of why they do what they do. After all, teachers need some basis for making the decisions that they make from moment to moment in their classrooms. Of course, this means that teachers, too, cannot be seen categorically, but rather they should be seen as individuals with their own teaching practices forged in and tailored to the local context.

Next, I turn to teaching. In the 1987 article, I wrote of the many language teaching methods that existed. These flourished in the 1970s and 1980s due to the challenge to behaviorism, and hence to the Audiolingual method. While the Audiolingual method continues to be practiced in many parts of the world today, the concept of “method” itself has been challenged. It has been said that language teaching is in a “post-method” phase (Kumaravivelu 2006). However, I think that not only is the term “method” in language teaching and language teacher education firmly established, but I also believe that teachers need knowledge of various methods. Methods are not intact packages of teaching practices imposed from above, but rather are coherent sets of thinking-in-action links available for teachers to interact with and learn from. Such investigations are vital to language teaching and to teachers’ defining their own sense of plausibility. When methods are seen as sets of coherent principles that link to practice, they help act as a foil whereby teachers can clarify their own pedagogical

principles. They also contribute to a professional discourse in which we all may engage (Freeman 1991); they challenge teachers to think in new ways; and they provide associated techniques with which teachers can experiment to come to new understandings (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson 2011).

I should note that critical theorists (e.g., Pennycook 2001) worry that we will assume that “one size fits all” and inappropriately impose language teaching methods from developed countries onto educators in developing countries. Of course, we should avoid such imposition; however, there is abundant evidence that teachers’ classroom practices are highly individual and durable (Larsen-Freeman and Freeman 2008). Such practices do not change simply on the basis of interventions of power instituted from the top down. As Widdowson (2004, 369) observes, what is needed is a “shift to localization,” in which pedagogic practices are designed in relation to local contexts, needs, and objectives.

For it is clear that universal solutions that are transposed acritically, often accompanied by calls for increased standardization, and that ignore indigenous conditions, the diversity of learners, and the agency of teachers, are immanent in a modernism that no longer applies, if it ever did. (Larsen-Freeman and Freeman 2008, 168)

Evidence for the impact of local conditions, the diversity of learners, and the agency of teachers lies in the fact that a method is enacted differently from context to context, and indeed from teacher to teacher. This is no doubt in part due to a teacher’s understanding; but it also differs with the learners being taught, their purpose for learning, and the context of instruction. As with language, methods are dynamically adaptable in use. This has always been the case, of course. Anyone who has visited classes (even a few) in which teachers profess to be practicing communicative language teaching will attest to the fact that what is taking place in such classrooms is very different, one from another. Thus, any methodologist should anticipate, indeed encourage, local adaptation. Perhaps the worth of a method should, in part, be a measure of this—how easily adaptable it is (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008).

Then, too, with innovations in technology and the development of increasingly fast and widely accessible Internet connections, there is more diversity in where language learning is taking place. Language learning has increasingly moved out of the classroom and into the computer lab, the Internet café, and even one’s home. Voice over IP software, such as Skype, has made it possible for international connections to be made and language learners/users to meet

virtually to discuss issues of common interest. This type of interaction, which no doubt benefits language learning, is occurring both informally and formally, the latter as a supplement to in-class instruction.

Amidst the talk of all this dynamism and diversity, one could reasonably point to the standards movement as a counterforce.

The standards movement has taken hold in many parts of the world and promotes the adoption of clear statements of instructional outcomes in educational programs as a way of improving learning outcomes in programs and to provide guidelines for program development, curriculum development, and assessment. (Richards 2008, 172)

While no one could argue against improving learning outcomes, I think that the standards movement is partially propelled by a reaction to all the dynamism and change and flux in the field. It is the educational establishment's attempt to bring things back under control.

The importance of diversity within unity

At this time, which might be called a period of “post-modern globalization” (Canagarajah 2006), I have tried to highlight a pattern I perceive in the language teaching field, namely, diversity within unity. Accompanying the shift of perspective on language from static homogeneity to dynamic heterogeneity, and the trends of population mobility, hybridity of communicative contexts, localization of practices, access that technology brings, and recognition of people's multiple identities is the fact that our theoretical constructs no longer fit into closed boxes. Indeed, my use of the triangle 25 years ago is no longer suitable today, for I would be the first to admit that putting aspects of the field into one or other triangle or category within a triangle implies that they are discrete and that the boundaries between them are not porous. But even a little reflection will show that this is not the case. From a complex adaptive system perspective on language, for instance, it is difficult to distinguish theoretically between language learning and language use.

I also recognize that, by being selective, I have not dealt with significant areas of the field, such as the language skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening, each clearly worthy of its own article. However, given the limitations of what can be accomplished in one article, what I have taken up is consistent with my assertion that the pattern that characterizes the field may no longer be (if it ever was) a reciprocal swing from unity to diversity, but rather one of diversity within a more generalized form of unity.

Further, I take the diversity within unity to be important to us all. For diversity within unity is characteristic of natural systems: our strength lies in our diversity. For instance Page (2007) shows how a decision-making process inclusive of diversity can create better decisions and hence a better society. Diversity within unity also highlights our uniqueness. In addition, it recognizes that there is no common endpoint arrived at by all language learners. Diversity within unity allows us to adapt to a rapidly changing world, and diversity serves as a crucible in which change takes place. Learners/speakers of a language actively transform their linguistic world; they do not conform to it. And this, we (native and non-natives, children and adults, monolinguals and bilinguals, teachers and students) do together.

References

- Burns, A., and J. C. Richards, eds. 2009. *The Cambridge guide to second language teacher education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Canagarajah, A. S. 2006. TESOL at forty: What are the issues? *TESOL Quarterly* 40 (1): 9–34.
- Ellis, N. C., and D. Larsen-Freeman. 2006. Language emergence: Implications for applied linguistics. *Applied Linguistics* 27 (4): 558–89.
- Ellis, N. C., with D. Larsen-Freeman. 2009. Constructing a second language: Analyses and computational simulations of the emergence of linguistic constructions from usage. *Language Learning*, Supplement 1: 93–128.
- Freeman, D. 1991. Mistaken constructs: Re-examining the nature and assumptions of language teacher education. In *Georgetown University round table on languages and linguistics*, ed. J. E. Alatis, 25–39. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Gagné, R., and K. Medsker. 1996. *The conditions of learning*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace.
- Gardner, H. 1999. *Intelligence reframed. Multiple intelligences for the 21st century*. New York: Basic Books.
- Graddol, D. 2006. *English next*. British Council.
- Jenkins, J. 2000. *The phonology of English as an international language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Johnson, K. 2006. The socio-cultural turn and its challenges for L2 education. *TESOL Quarterly* 40 (1): 235–57.
- Kramsch, C., ed. 2002. *Language acquisition and language socialization: Ecological perspectives*. London: Continuum.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. 2006. TESOL methods: Changing tracks, challenging trends. *TESOL Quarterly* 40 (1): 59–81.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. 2003. *Teaching language: From grammar to grammaring*. Boston: Heinle/Cengage.

- Larsen-Freeman, D. 2006. The emergence of complexity, fluency, and accuracy in the oral and written production of five Chinese learners of English. *Applied Linguistics* 27 (4): 590–619.
- Larsen-Freeman, D., and M. Anderson. 2011. *Techniques and principles in language teaching*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Larsen-Freeman, D., and L. Cameron. 2008. *Complex systems in applied linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Larsen-Freeman, D., and D. Freeman. 2008. Language moves: The place of “foreign” languages in classroom language and teaching. *Review of Research in Education* 32: 147–86.
- Lave, J., and E. Wenger. 1991. *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Page, S. 2007. *The difference: How the power of diversity creates better groups, firms, schools, and societies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Pawley, A., and F. Syder. 1983. Two puzzles for linguistic theory: Nativelike selection and nativelike fluency. In *Language and communication*, ed. J. Richards and R. Schmidt, 191–226. London: Longman.
- Pennycook, A. 2001. *Critical applied linguistics: A critical introduction*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Prabhu, N. S. 1990. There is no best method—Why? *TESOL Quarterly* 24 (2): 161–76.
- Prodromou, L. 2008. *English as a lingua franca: A corpus-based analysis*. London: Continuum.
- Richards, J. 2008. Second language teacher education today. *RELC Journal* 39 (2): 158–77.
- Schmitt, N. 2005. Grammar: rules or patterning? *Applied Linguistics Forum* 26 (2): 1–2.
- Seidlhofer, B. 2001. Closing a conceptual gap: The case for a description of English as a lingua franca. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 11 (2): 133–58.
- Sinclair, J. 1991. *Corpus, concordance, collocation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Slobin, D. 1996. From “thought and language” to “thinking for speaking.” In *Rethinking linguistic relativity*, ed. J. Gumperz and S. Levinson, 70–96. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Swain, M. 2006. Linguaging, agency and collaboration in advanced language proficiency. In *Advanced language learning: The contribution of Halliday and Vygotsky*, ed. H. Byrnes, 95–108. London: Continuum.
- Tedick, D., ed. 2005. *Second language teacher education: International perspectives*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Wei, Li. 2010. The nature of linguistic norms and their relevance to multilingual development. In *Multilingual norms*, ed. M. Cruz-Ferreira, 397–404. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Widdowson, H. G. 2004. A perspective on recent trends. In *A history of English language teaching*, 2nd ed., ed. A. P. R. Howatt with H. G. Widdowson, 397–404. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wray, A. 2002. *Formulaic language and the lexicon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

.....●

DIANE LARSEN-FREEMAN is a Professor of Education and Professor of Linguistics and a Research Scientist at the English Language Institute, University of Michigan. She is also a Distinguished Senior Faculty Fellow at the School for International Training and has been a conference speaker in over 60 countries around the world. Her latest book is the third edition of *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*, co-authored with Marti Anderson. In 2011, Dr. Larsen-Freeman was presented the Distinguished Scholarship and Service Award by the American Association for Applied Linguistics.