

Conference Reports:

Interview with Merrill Swain following her keynote speech at the NALDIC annual conference 2005.

In the interview Merrill Swain reflects on the changes in her research over the years, discusses the importance of sociocultural research perspectives on second language learning and gives us a glimpse of some of the issues in the North American bilingual and second language education context. Merrill Swain is a Professor in the Second Language Education Program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto.

Charlotte Franson: Could you reflect on your work in bilingual education and offer our readers some of your reflections on the key themes and issues that have arisen?

Merrill Swain: Well, I have been involved in researching French immersion (FI) programmes almost since they began. The first FI programme began in Montreal, Quebec in 1965 and by 1968/69 there was interest being shown in other parts of Canada because of the positive evaluations of the initial immersion programme. So I got in at the ground level by being hired as a research assistant to evaluate immersion programmes that were starting up in Ontario, in Ottawa and Toronto, and then, as it happened, all across Canada. In those days there were three main questions. One question was: 'What happens to the students' English language skills?' The children who went into the programmes at that time were from homes where English was spoken. Parents (and educators) were concerned about what would happen to their children's English language skills by educating them entirely in French. So we gave various standardised tests that measured the students' English language skills (particularly vocabulary knowledge and reading).

The second question was: 'How well would they learn the content of the school curriculum when being taught via a second language?' To respond to this concern, we gave standardised tests in mathematics as well as cognitive ability tests. In later grades levels, where History and Science were taught, there weren't many standardised tests, so we used tests that the schools developed. Even though the students were instructed in French, the tests were in English. The tests were also given to the students who had been taught the same material in English because, quite frankly, the parents wanted to make sure their children were not losing out in terms of learning the prescribed curriculum content in English.

One would expect that the FI students would not do as well as the students in the regular English programme but, in fact, these first two questions were answered positively. As soon as the students got any formal instruction in English they caught up with the children in the regular English programme. And in the content areas that were measured, for the most part, the FI students and the English-educated students performed similarly.

The third main question that was asked was: 'What happens to the students' French?' Nobody really knew what it would mean to immerse young children all day in a language they did not know initially. Would they become like native speakers? How much grammar should be taught? Would they really be better than those who were being taught the language *per se* for twenty minutes a day (core FSL)? Fairly quickly we realised we couldn't find a test that we could give to the FI and core FSL students because the same test was too difficult for the children getting twenty minutes a day and way too easy for the children in the French immersion programme. So we started using tests that were standardised in Québec for francophone students. The overall long-term global answer to the question about their French skills is that, in terms of reading and listening comprehension, the FI students did fairly well relative to francophone children of the same age. In other words, in terms of the kind of French they heard and read at school, their comprehension was good.

However, with respect to their productive skills – speaking and writing – the children were clearly identifiable as non-native speakers. Some people say, ‘who cares?’, and that’s a fair question. However, if you give these students an opportunity to be involved in an exchange programme where they have the opportunities to interact with French peers and adults, they soak up the language, quickly recognising differences between the way they’re speaking and the way the French person is speaking, and they integrate well and their French improves.

Even now, there’s an ongoing debate of how much teaching of grammar should occur – the ‘focus on form’ debate. Often what happens is that although teachers say ‘yes, we need to teach grammar’, they do so as a separate part of the curriculum and tend not to integrate it with content teaching.

CF: Here in England the teaching of ‘language across the curriculum’ has been encouraged for years, where subject teachers have been encouraged to include language within the teaching of their subject, yet it is still difficult to achieve.

MS: I think it’s very difficult to achieve. The study I was talking about today, where the students were doing some writing is one way to integrate content and language teaching. Of course, the writing should then be about the content of the curriculum. But what is important is that the students are asked to *reflect* afterwards about the way in which they used language in their writing. At the primary level, teachers seem to accept the need to integrate language and content teaching. However, often at the secondary level, the teachers say ‘No, I’m a History teacher’ or ‘No, I’m a Science teacher, I shouldn’t have to worry about language’. But, in fact, in both first and second language teaching, language and content need to be worked on together.

CF: So has there been any application of content based language teaching models, such as the work of Bernie Mohan, or of Donna Brinton and others?

MS: No, not really. The work of Snow and Brinton is about adults. Bernie’s (Bernie Mohan) work has been used a lot in the ESL context at school levels in British

Columbia. He and Margaret Early have done a tremendous amount of work in this area, but it hasn’t been taken up in the FI context unfortunately.

CF: One of the points that you made in your talk was that the ‘language rich input’ of the classroom was not enough. I wonder if there was anything further you might say?

MS: Well, I think immersion programmes and ‘comprehensible input’ got linked in the research literature because Stephen Krashen spent a sabbatical in Canada a number of years ago. He spent time observing immersion programmes and claimed that they represented the most successful second language teaching experiment ever. However, that’s not what our research findings suggested. As I just mentioned, the French of the FI students was not developing in target-like ways. Yet we knew that students were getting plenty of comprehensible input because the students were doing perfectly well on tests that measure the content they were being taught. And, to make a long story short, after observing many immersion classes, I concluded that one of the things that was missing in these classes were opportunities for the FI students to produce French – to speak and write it coherently, accurately and appropriately. *Et voilà*, that was the origin of the ‘output hypothesis’.

CF: I had hoped to ask you about that.

MS: Now I talk about ‘collaborative dialogue’ and ‘languaging’ as the key concepts. These concepts are still about “output”, but they put the emphasis on the co-construction of language as a process (languaging), not a product (language).

The kinds of activities that we’ve been researching engage the students in speaking and writing and reflecting on what they have said or written – that is, co-constructing meaning through languaging. I wish French immersion teachers would use more of these types of activities. They are able to tell teachers (and the students themselves) about the students’ conception of the target language.

Initially I was working within an information processing framework (output hypothesis),

but now, my work is much more framed and informed by sociocultural theory.

CF: Yes, this is big topic, for example, it was a major theme at the recent AAAL (American Association of Applied Linguistics) conference. Many of us here in England could say we've been concerned about this for years! What do you think about this shift in North America to a sociocultural perspective – the shift in research from quantitative psychological-based research to a qualitative sociocultural paradigm?

MS: Well, I was trained as a quantitative researcher, but I love reading qualitative research! In my research, and that of most of my students, we tend to use both: the richest research is that which uses qualitative findings to explain and enhance what we learn from numbers. Using sociocultural theory to frame our research questions means that we need to understand a learner's history in order to understand why the trajectory of a learner is what it is, or is going to be. And I don't think one can do this using only quantitative paradigms – using numbers only.

CF: And in the context here, when teachers are working with linguistic and ethnic minority pupils, they have to keep in mind that there are multiple issues influencing a child's performance.

MS: That's for sure. And another thing we have to keep in mind is that we can't generalise even within one ethnic group. Each child within the same ethnic and linguistic group will have different histories.

CF: Can you tell us something about what is happening in Canada and North America? We know sociocultural theory is prominent, but what else?

MS: There are many in Canada and North America who don't think that sociocultural theory is where it's at. The 'focus on form' researchers still consider that input is the only causal variable in second language learning. They are not taking into account the agency of the learner. There is little effort to understand the 'human-ness' of the people involved in the study.

CF: Do you think ESL practitioners are more attuned to the sociocultural perspectives of their work?

MS: More so than some researchers? Yes, because they are in the "front line". Every day they have face-to-face contact with the complexity of the lives of their learners.

CF: Does ESL have a big presence in education?

MS: Oh yes, certainly. Let me give you one statistic. According to a recent United Nations report, in the city of Toronto, more than 50% of the population are foreign born. That's huge. The report said that Toronto is the second most diverse city in the world. It's a phenomenal figure that can't be ignored. In large cities in Canada, like Toronto, teacher education must include ESL issues. Also, there is much discussion about whether and how to support the first languages of these learners.

In the United States, the only comment I want to make is about the "No Child Left Behind" policy. This policy appears to be terrible for bilingual or multilingual education because all the testing is happening in English. So, even in a program where another language, for example Spanish, is supposed to be the medium of instruction, the amount of time devoted to that language is being eroded. The 'No Child Left Behind' policy is turning into an 'English-only' policy.

CF: I think we've run out of time – but thank you very much for the interview!