

# Influence of Knowledge About Second Language Acquisition Research on Foreign Language Teachers

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## 1. Introduction

Teachers in a foreign language learning environment, where the target language is not usually used, have diverse responsibilities for creating optimal language learning environment, including teaching materials, approaches or methods, evaluation, and whatever is related to promoting learners' development of interlanguage.

A teacher in a foreign language class is an influential factor to decide how successful language learning there can be. This makes research on teachers of a foreign language important and essential. For the past few years, the author's classes in general English courses "English for Academic Purposes (EAPI)" and "EAPII" for the 1<sup>st</sup>-year students have been settings where some of the 4<sup>th</sup>-year students majoring in English language teaching have done their senior thesis research work. For example, one of my seminar students has investigated how the degree of learner-centeredness in English class is influenced by how language teachers conduct their class. From the viewpoint of teacher education, some research conducted by English-language-teaching majors would bring some useful research findings.

Foreign language teacher education should have more attention for better English language education. English language teachers at Japanese school have received teacher education at Japanese universities approved by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, and Science (MEXT) to be legally and officially certified as English teachers. In other words, teacher education courses at Japanese university assume a responsibility of providing qualified teacher education courses and is accordingly supposed to have a strong

influence on the students who would like to become English teachers after graduation, that is, pre-service language teachers. Teacher education at university should develop qualified teachers for better English language education.

The theory and research field that is significantly related to language teacher education is second language acquisition (SLA) theory and research. Among different approaches to SLA, Classroom SLA/ Instructed SLA is the most informative and directly relevant approach (Koyanagi, 2004). In fact, the SLA theory and research findings have not contributed so much to teacher education as logically expected (Borg, 2004; Borg, 2006; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 2010a, 2010b; Eykin, 1987; John, 1996; Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Markee, 1997).

This paper is aimed at explaining why it is important for a foreign language teacher to have knowledge about SLA research by exploring the relationship between SLA theory and research and teacher education. Drawing on the framework describing elements and processes in language teacher cognition by Borg (2006), the following five aspects are going to be discussed: prior language learning and teaching experience, constructivist teacher education, SLA theory and research for teacher education, divide to compatibility between SLA knowledge and language pedagogy, and gap-filling suggestion.

## 2. Prior language learning and teaching experience

It is essential to understand the most influential factor on teaching practice. Considering the teacher education system in Japan, university courses for pre-

service teachers are apparently regarded as a key factor in the system. According to Richardson (1996), however, “pre-service teacher education seems a weak intervention” (p. 113). He points out two stronger influential factors: the previous learning experience as a learner and teaching experience as a student teacher and teacher. Since teacher education is sandwiched between these two factors, its effect on teaching practice ends up with a less powerful factor.

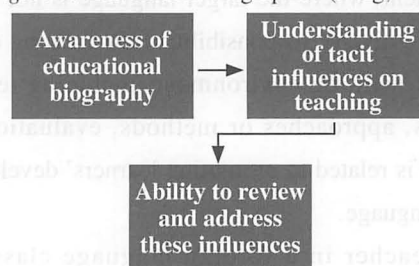
This prior language learning and teaching experience were originally featured by the concept of personal practical knowledge (PPK) in the field of mainstream educational research, which is defined as “an individual’s particular way of reconstructing the past and intentions for the future to deal with the exigencies of a present situation” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988 cited in Borg, 2006). This concept was also applied to language teaching. Golombek (1998), for example, revealed that two ESL teachers’ PPK informed their teaching practice as a sort of interpretive framework to reconstruct their experience and respond to problems they face in their teaching situations. The construct of PPK involves a constructivist view that teacher cognition evolves throughout teachers’ career.

Although PPK would “contribute to a more holistic understanding of language teachers’ practices and cognitions” (Borg, 2003, p. 98), does PPK facilitate or hinder pre-service and in-service teachers’ professional development? Johnson (1994) states that it is their language learning experience in and outside classroom that makes pre-service teachers judge the appropriateness of theory, methodology, and teaching materials and decide how much of what they have learned in initial teacher education they will accept. His research results indicate that teachers’ PPK has a possibility to reject teacher education including useful theory and research findings against their possessed PPK. This possibility is recognised as a negative aspect of apprenticeship of observation, which is likely to be resistance to teacher education (Lortie, 1975).

Whether PPK works positively or negatively, its impact on teaching practice is powerful. The statement that “most of us teach as we were taught or in a way that matches our ideas and preferences about

how we learn” (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. xvi) is persuasive enough even though we are not provided with any concrete evidence of it. Acknowledging its impact, Borg (2010) presented a chart which shows the significance of being aware of educational biography such as language learning experience at school. The understanding of the influences of educational biography on teaching practice is expected to enable teachers to review and address these influences (see Figure 1). PPK is so influential that teacher educators should keep in mind that it cannot be ignored in their teacher education.

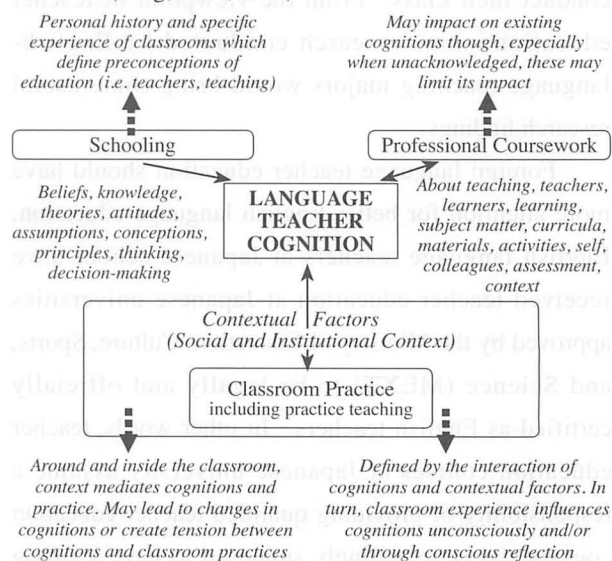
Figure 1. Educational biographies (Borg, 2010)



### 3. A framework of language teacher cognition and constructivist teacher education

The PPK above mentioned is directly affected by schooling in a framework below in Figure 2 (Borg, 2006, 2010). Borg (2006) emphasises the importance of the schooling component of the construct by stating “programmes which ignore trainee teachers’ prior beliefs may be less effective at influencing these (trainees’ cognitions)” (p. 284).

Figure 2. Elements and process in language teacher cognition (Borg, 2006, 2010)



The impact of schooling is also supported by other research papers (Farrell, 1999; Almazra, 1996, Pennington & Urmston, 1998; Richards & Pennington, 1998; Urmston, 2003; Warford & Reeves, 2003). Understanding this overwhelming impact of schooling, particularly when teacher educators face evidence of the negative impact of schooling component, they cannot help feeling disappointed by realizing that professional coursework is much less powerful than the past learning and teaching experience.

The other powerful component that interacts with language teacher cognition is classroom practice including practice teaching. The classroom practice interacts with teacher cognition each other with contextual factors, i.e., social and institutional contexts, playing a mediating role between the teaching practice and teacher cognitions (Borg, 2006, p. 284). Individual student teachers are affected by contextual factors during practice teaching and transform their cognitions in different ways depending on the contexts where they are in (da Silva, 2005; Pennington & Urmston, 1998). Again, university teacher educators may have some degree of skepticism about their role and teacher education courses at university and wonder how their teacher education courses will be able to benefit their students with similar or more effectiveness.

The last but less powerful component that influences teacher cognition is professional coursework. The relationship between teacher cognition and professional coursework is described in an added explanation in the Borg's framework that professional coursework "May impact on existing cognitions though, especially when unacknowledged, these may limit its impact" (Borg, 2006, p.283). This described relationship between the two corresponds to Richardson (1996), which admits the weak intervention of teacher education (p. 113). Then, do teacher educators just have to accept their teacher education courses as a façade of teacher education system constructed officially by a nation?

Teacher educators should not fall into a simplistic conclusion about their role. Teacher educators should take a role of mediators to promote interaction among the four components in the Borg's framework:

schooling, classroom practice in the context, teacher cognition, and professional coursework. Actually, whereas some research findings have shown insignificant relationship between teacher education and teacher cognition (Kagan, 1992; Peacock, 2001), others have found the impact of teacher education on teacher cognition (Almarza, 1996; Cabaroglu & Roberts, 2000; Freeman, 1993; MacDonald, Badger & White, 2001; Richards, Ho & Giblin, 1996; Sendan & Roberts, 1998).

When teacher education is interpreted as "constructivist" teacher education, it is to be based on "a learning or meaning-making theory" (Richardson, 1997, p. 3). Richardson (1997) states the essence of constructivism as follows:

...individuals create their own understandings, based upon the interaction of what they already know and believe, and phenomena and ideas with which they come into contact. Constructivism is a descriptive theory of learning (this is the way people learn or develop); it is not a prescriptive theory of learning (this is the way people *should* learn) (p.3).

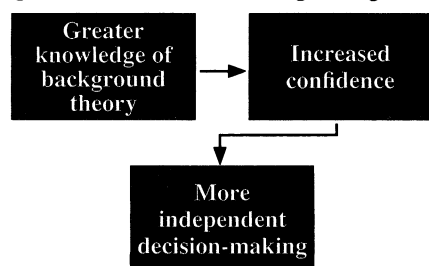
Teacher education can have more flexibility and possibility if it is considered as constructivist education. The concept of constructivism should and will give teacher educators a hope that their teacher education courses will be more promising and able to contribute to pre-service and in-service teachers more than the present. And if their course relevance and quality are explored and improved further, the course will positively and significantly influence their learning and development.

#### **4. SLA theory and research for teacher education**

Provided that teacher development can be transformed by teacher education, drawing on constructivism, over negative influence by the past learning and teaching experience, how should SLA theory and research be dealt with in teacher education courses? Borg (2010) presented a teacher development flow chart that is caused by theoretical knowledge, including SLA theory and research (see Figure. 3). The greater knowledge of background theory teachers

develop, the further increased confidence they will have, and the more independent decision they will be able to make. In this flow chart used for his keynote lecture about teacher cognition and teacher autonomy, he suggested the importance of reasoning and justification for what teachers do. He introduced an example statement by a teacher, “I feel freer to make decisions on the spot, to adapt plans and change things. I feel freer to be flexible, because I know that I can justify what I’m doing. (EFL teacher, UK)”

Figure 3. Theoretical knowledge (Borg, 2010)



This theoretical view of a positive effect of theoretical knowledge on teachers’ confidence and independence reflects ideas expressed by some influential SLA researchers. For example, Lightbown and Spada (2006, p. xv) maintain that not only teachers’ experience but also SLA theory and research will help both novice and experienced teachers adapt textbooks and teaching materials in ways corresponding to what SLA research suggests; Brown (2007, pp. 285-287) implies that teachers should develop their understanding of SLA because it underlies the pedagogical process.

Two surveys employing a questionnaire about L2 acquisition from Lightbown & Spada (1993) are worth noting. One of them is about belief in the beginning of teacher education; the other is about belief at the end of a teacher education course. According to Brown and McGannon (1998), pre-service teachers at the initial stages of teacher education had some inadequate beliefs for effective L2 pedagogy. MacDonald, Badger and White (2001) presented a research finding that the students, though not all, who took courses about SLA showed belief change in the direction that was expected by the course. These two surveys indicate the possibility that pre-service teachers with inadequate beliefs will change them into adequate ones after

learning SLA theory and research.

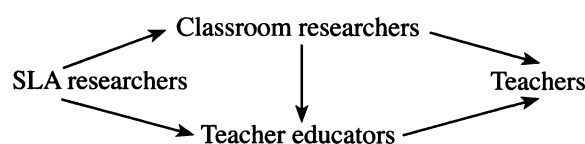
While MacDonald, Badger and White (2001) used a fairly traditional SLA course that transmits SLA knowledge to the participants, some other more empirical researches showed SLA knowledge positively influenced teacher trainees’ understanding and beliefs about language learning (Angelova, 2005; Busch, 2010; Erlam, 2008; McDonough, 2006). They involved their trainees in exploratory activities or experiential projects. One of the pre-service teachers in Busch (2010) made a comment that represents the positive effect of SLA knowledge as follows:

... , I will attempt to summarize how my beliefs about SLA have changed. For example, the tutoring sessions near the end of the semester, I believe, were far more productive. I think this is because I had acquired knowledge of *why* certain errors are made. They are not just errors with one particular learner; they are errors that are recognized consistently in studies. I never knew the extent of all that is involved with SLA, and I believe this class has made me not only more sympathetic to the L2 learner, but more competent as a teacher (p. 332).

This comment shows the satisfaction with the development of reasoning and justification and supports the possibility that SLA knowledge will induce belief change of pre-service teachers about L2 learning and teaching.

Reviewing these research findings, Ellis (2010b) proposes, “There is clearly a need for more research on the roles that teacher educators can play in mediating between SLA researchers and teachers”(p.4). A framework below is the structure in which the roles of SLA researchers, classroom researchers, teacher educators, and teachers presented by Ellis (2010, p. 2). Teacher educators take a role of liaison between SLA theory and research, and teachers in practice.

Figure 4. A framework for examining the second language acquisition–language pedagogy nexus (Ellis, 2010a, 2010b)



In sum, knowledge of SLA theory and research is highly likely to promote teacher development in constructivist teacher education, in spite of overwhelming impact of teachers' prior language learning and teaching experience. When pre-service and in-service teachers learn SLA theory and research, favourably, by being involved in experiential projects and reflection on L2 learning and teaching that occurs in the projects, they will be empowered to do a more self-directed teaching supported by reasoning and judgment based on their knowledge about SLA research and theory.

### 5. Divide to Compatibility between SLA knowledge and language pedagogy

At the level of research as referred to in the previous section 4., SLA knowledge seems to work beneficially for pre-service and in-service teachers' beliefs about L2 learning and teaching. In the past actual classroom language teaching, however, a mistrust of SLA was developed by many teachers and aggravated the gap between practitioners and researchers (Doughty & Williams, 1998, p. 1). This "unhealthy situation" emerged from little attention paid by researchers to "the real-life concerns of teachers and policy-makers" (Eykin, 1987; Markee, 1997). Markee (1997) points out the gap between research based theories by SLA researchers and experience based theories by practitioners as the source of incompatibility between the two in language classroom (pp. 80-81). Ellis (2002) also indicates that ideas coming from practitioners are not less valid than those based on SLA research.

Although Ellis (2002) admits the limited degree of contribution by SLA research to actual language classroom, he suggests that SLA research offers issues and ideas that should be explored by classroom teachers. Borg (2006) also takes notice of a chance where the degree of effectiveness of what teachers do will be theoretically clarified in comparison with what SLA suggests. One of the SLA research approaches termed as Classroom SLA/Instructed SLA is expected to be an area where practitioners "address issues that are of pedagogical importance" (Doughty and

Williams, 1998, p. 1). "Psycholinguistically relevant pedagogy" has been situated in language education in foreign countries (Koyanagi, 2004, p. 201), which is a welcoming indication to bridge the gap between SLA theory and research and language pedagogy.

### 6. Gap-filling suggestion

As recent experiential teacher education projects (Angelova, 2005; Busch, 2010; Erlam, 2008; McDonough, 2006) prove, a combination of experience and reflection encourages pre-service and in-service teachers to explore L2 language learning and teaching and maybe change their beliefs in a direction that is compatible with SLA research findings. In addition, these learner-centered experiential projects are more effective than a course that transmits SLA knowledge (MacDonald, et al., 2001) from the viewpoint of constructivist teacher education.

Ellis (2010a, 2010b) proposes 11 principles that guide teacher educators to design a SLA course, with a particular emphasis on SLA topics (what) and the way (how) relevant to teachers, for L2 teacher development. Furthermore, Ellis (2010b) presents a model course based on the 11 guiding principles with a SLA topic of corrective feedback (pp. 9-14). The model (though he modestly calls it as an example) takes a position of constructivist teacher education, which allows pre-service and in-service teachers to evolve *their* SLA theory, not forces them to follow the prescribed theory.

This model offers opportunities of reconstructing teacher education courses. The course reconstruction will be feasible if teacher educators are knowledgeable, creative, and flexible enough to design a course in SLA customised to their pre- and in-service teachers' career and context.

### 7. Conclusion

When we face a seemingly ever-lasting serious problem that decides our fate, is there any reason we do not implement a promising solution even with a possibility of failure? Knowledge about SLA theory and research is probably one of the solutions to the present L2 learning and teaching by way of promoting L2 teacher development.

In this paper, along with the acknowledgment of an overwhelming impact of prior language learning and teaching experience, a possibility of incorporating SLA theory and research into teacher education was figured out from the viewpoint of constructivism. Moreover, along with the recognition of hard-to-get compatibility between SLA knowledge and language pedagogy, some successful researches were introduced that concluded a SLA course for teacher development worked effectively and a model course based on the guiding principles was presented.

A direct answer to the question “Why is it important for a language teacher to know about second language acquisition research?” is that pre- and in-service teachers can be self-directed and empowered with reasoning ability nurtured by knowledge of SLA theory and research. Teacher development has to be continuously evolving in accordance with SLA research progress. To realize it, teacher educators have to take an essential role of mediating between teachers and SLA theory and research.

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