

# **Research in ELT**

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## **Welcoming Address**

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Dean  
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President, Distinguished guests, Ladies and gentlemen.

It is indeed an honour and a great pleasure for me to welcome all of our guest speakers and participants to the International Conference on Research in ELT organized by the School of Liberal Arts, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi.

The role of research is becoming increasingly important in the field of English language teaching and learning in Thailand. Since approaches used in the teaching and learning of English are generally created in the English speaking countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States, their applicability in Thailand is unclear. Conducting research by Thai teachers of English is regarded as a key factor to enhance their perspectives in the field and as a result, this will brighten our ELT future.

Realizing the importance of research, the School of Liberal Arts, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi decided to organize an international conference on the topic "Research in ELT". The School has a tradition of organizing an international conference every four years, and the growing emphasis on research combined with a comparative lack of experience and expertise in the area in Thailand led us to the focus of research in English language teaching for the 2003 conference.

We sincerely hope that this conference will ignite a desire to conduct research in those teachers who are new to research, will support and stimulate existing teacher-researchers, and will promote the development of English language teaching in Thailand.

This conference comprises 150 participants from 14 countries including Thailand. There are six international authorities in the area of research in ELT giving plenary papers, 43 eminent scholars giving papers in parallel sessions, and poster presentations. Eight colleagues in Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong cancelled their papers due to the unfortunate circumstance of SARS disease.

On behalf of the organizing committee, I would like to express my sincere thanks to the American Embassy, the Canadian Embassy, and the British Council for their generous support; and finally to all of the speakers and the participants, without whom this conference was not possible.

## **Introduction**

Research is becoming an increasingly important part of English teachers' work for several reasons:

- Conducting research, often informal, is a key approach to teacher development.
- There is an increasing focus on insider perspectives in research.
- Potential areas for research in ELT are becoming broader and new areas are opening up.
- Conducting research increases the professionalism of ELT teachers.

With this increase in the importance of research in ELT, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi organized a conference on this issue. Aspects focussed on included:

- action research and teacher development
- classroom-based research
- language-program-oriented research
- linguistic and educational research applicable to ELT
- methods and approaches in research
- the role of research in ELT

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# **English learning experiences of Thai students enrolled at a university: a case study**

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**Thailand**

## **Introduction**

This study began as a result of my interest and curiosity in the teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and as a Second Language (ESL). Throughout a teaching career spanning over 30 years as an English teacher both in Thailand and Brunei Darussalam, I have experienced significant changes in the field of EFL and ESL being subject to a range of interacting forces and adapting accordingly. Consequently, in my quest to become a 'good language teacher', I have identified many questions about how people learn English. Of course, the notion of a 'good language teacher' is vexed and subject to a number of differing interpretations. Such questions about how English is learned and how it should be best taught are indeed what Strauss and Corbin (1990: 35) list as sources of researchable problems in the area of *personal and professional beliefs*.

Wenden (1991), Rubin (1975), Rubin and Thompson (1982) and Lightbown and Spada (1993) list qualifications of 'good' language learners. However, in different situations, especially shaded by different cultures, good learning can be defined in countless ways depending on one's own interpretation. This amounts to a perspective I have developed so far—English teaching and learning are still as mysterious as ever; for example, *what is happening inside the mind of a successful learner as he or she is learning the language?* I strongly believe that a single formula about how one should learn English cannot be a magic formula for all learners of English. A complex area like Second Language Acquisition (SLA) or Foreign Language Acquisition (FLA), which covers people of different races, nationalities and abilities, leaves ample room for investigation into local case studies where more mysteries about how people learn and like to learn can be revealed. As a cultural group, Thai students, for example, may have their own unique way of learning English or, as Thais learning English, they may have cultural differences in their learning approaches.

## **General problem statement**

Numerous changes in terms of teaching approaches and teacher development programmes have occurred, but advancement in terms of progress made by learners has not been remarkable or, rather, concrete enough to determine the desired teaching and learning process. The current state of English teaching and learning in Thailand, where almost all students who have gone through formal education study English for more than eight years, still requires attention.

A meta-analysis of 350 studies in the field of English teaching and learning in Thailand from 1972 to 1987 (Sukamolson, 1990: 172) indicated that the achievements of students at all levels – primary, secondary and tertiary – were disappointing. Their performances

were less than satisfactory (60%), even though they had been studying English for many years – some for four, some for eight and others for twelve years. At university level, the scenario has not been any better. According to Komin (1998: 266), an average Thai graduate's English proficiency is at a very poor level—meaning basically not functional. Around 5% of 60 university graduates applying for a master's degree programme could show some degree of correct understanding for reading a 3-4 sentence paragraph in English, with the rest classified as 'hopeless'. Anantaset (2001: 59-60) reported that the general proficiency level of candidates for doctoral degree programmes at Chulalongkorn University, as measured in four proficiency tests, was found to be very low, with 67%, 72%, 67% and 71% of the test takers labelled as very limited users of English.

Thai graduates cannot serve the needs of their employers in terms of their English ability required by the workplace. According to Anantaset (2001: 58), Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI) reported in its annual yearbook of 1996 that 200 business people and 100 representatives from various enterprises who attended a seminar organized by CULI voiced their disappointment at the English ability level of Chulalongkorn University graduates. They admitted that these graduates may have good knowledge about the English language but they cannot use it effectively to do their jobs. Koanantakul (2000: 87) mentioned that one communication problem has stemmed from the fact that Thais are unable to use English fluently.

With this startling fact, it is probably correct to say that there is some ineffectiveness in the time students spend learning English. Questions that are raised include: what and how has English been taught? is the time allocated for English lessons quality time? Certainly, answering these questions requires a scrutiny of learning processes.

Thais, like other peoples, cannot escape from the new challenges and influences of world development such as globalization and the use of high technology where English is the medium. This is an explanation in itself as to why English is a necessity for Thai learners.

### **The purposes and significance of the study**

First, this study seeks to contribute to the understanding of English learning experiences of students who study English as a Foreign Language (EFL) by investigating the students themselves. Second, the study hopes to identify essential factors that are central to student learning and find the relationship patterns. Finally, it is hoped that sample events and incidents may lead to an evolving grounded theory that explains the critical factors that support or hinder English learning and the relationship patterns of these factors.

This study has a three-tier significance. First and foremost, it is significant for me as a teacher of English. The study will act as a self-development tool since I will hear the stories told first-hand. Learning from students will enable me to plan my teaching in ways that suit them. Secondly, Walailak University will benefit from the findings through this double-loop learning (Agyris, 1978). Finally, it is useful for Thailand, which might use what is found in the study to improve the teaching and learning of English if the same studies are replicated in other universities.

## **Research questions**

The main research question is:

- What are the English learning experiences of students enrolled at Walailak University?

The research sub-questions are:

- Why are some students successful learners of English?
- Why are some students not successful?
- Are students in control of their learning?
- What are the obstacles?
- What are students' beliefs and values of learning?
- What is the meaning of 'learning'?
- How do they see themselves as learners of English?
- What are the greatest influences on their learning?
- Are they autonomous learners?
- What kinds of curriculum content, teaching and learning processes and evaluation are offered? Are they supportive or are they obstacles?
- Do students prefer the learner-centred approach?
- What are their goals of learning English?

## **The Thai language context**

Thailand is a country with only one official language, Standard or Central Thai. In brief, Thai is the most dominant language used in the daily life of the Thai people. It is the medium of instruction in most schools. For the majority of Thai students, English is a foreign language that is rarely used outside the classroom but is a compulsory subject.

In recent years, the status of the English language in the curriculum has changed for the better. Directed by the Ministry of Education in 1997, schools were required to teach children English from Primary One onwards (Ministry of Education, Thailand, 1996). The reason for this change is crystal clear. The transformation of industries to be more information-based or service-based requires that students have a high proficiency level in English in order to be competitive in the job market. Besides, a good command of English in all the four skills, listening, reading, speaking and writing, will enable students to enjoy life to the fullest.

## **The research site**

Walailak University is a state university established in principle 10 years ago (1993) to serve students in the south of Thailand, but the actual intake of students began in 1998. It is located at Thasala District, Nakhorn Sri Thammarat Province, about 800 kilometres from Bangkok. Being rather new, Walailak has not yet fully established its reputation. The implication for this study is that students at Walailak University are not representative of the cream of Thailand. That means research participants in this study have gone through the common experience of learning English in average schools where English is studied as a foreign language.

# **'Alberto', *c'est moi*: a language teacher learning Japanese**

**Martha Clark Cummings**  
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*Japan*

## **Introduction**

I arrived in Japan in June 2002, determined not only to learn Japanese, but also to pay attention to my language learning processes, and to compare the way I learn with how I teach. This paper describes the preliminary findings of a longitudinal study of a language learner, using ethnographic case study and first-person narrative. Since that language learner is me, it is introspective and subjective.

According to the TESOL Research Agenda (2001), which has provided me with a rationale for this study:

“...one type of design that is presently underrepresented in TESOL studies is sustained longitudinal research... it is important for our field to investigate language and literacy development and academic achievement over several years of education... we encourage researchers to provide as much contextual information as possible about their research... This rich detail may well increase our understanding of the research results and will also provide critical information for consumers of the research who are considering the applicability of the research to their own settings.”

My preliminary research questions are as follows. The TESOL Research Agenda Task Force suggests we should do more longitudinal case studies: (a) What will we learn if we do? (b) What can I learn about language teaching from doing a case study on a language learner? (c) Will metacognitive work on my process of learning a language help me learn the language better? And finally (d) will this longitudinal case study provide me with hypotheses for further research on larger numbers of subjects?

## **Review of the related literature**

There is a history of case studies and diary studies in the literature of language learning and teaching. Nunan (1992) states that “...case studies are particularly suited to the types of action-oriented research projects... where the purpose is, in the first instance, to help practitioners enhance their understanding of, and solve problems related to, their own professional workplace...” (p. 89). Also, according to Nunan, an important function of the case study is “falsifying a previously established hypothesis.” (p. 88). So that if, for instance, I were able to demonstrate that a woman over fifty years old was able to succeed in learning Japanese so as to be indistinguishable from native speakers, I would

falsify the Critical Period Hypothesis, which states, in a nutshell, that if you don't learn a language before you finish puberty, you will always have a foreign accent. But case studies, diary studies, and first-person narratives have recently been recognized as having significantly more important functions than the simple falsification of theories.

As van Lier (forthcoming) puts it, "...in the practical world in which case studies are conducted, *particularization* may be just as important – if not more so – than *generalization*. By particularization I mean that insights from a case study can inform, be adapted to, and provide comparative information to a wide variety of other cases...Furthermore, if two cases provide apparently contradictory information about a certain issue...this can provide much food for thought and further research, this being of great benefit to the field." (p.11).

A thorough review of the diary studies completed up to 1990 is included in Bailey (1991). Among the most well-known case studies of language learners are Schumann's (1976) study of 'Alberto', a 33-year-old Costa Rican; Schmidt and Frota's (1986) study of Schmidt himself, learning Portuguese in Brazil; and Schmidt's (1983) study of Wes, a Japanese artist learning English in Hawaii, which can be seen as a rebuttal of Schumann (1976), since it argues that social and psychological distance are not the primary factors in preventing language learning.

Bailey (1991) suggests that "The experience of studying a language again, when one is already a language teacher, is always revealing. But the powerful and sometimes surprising insights one gains by struggling with a new linguistic system and all the emotional baggage that goes with it can best be captured and later reflected upon by keeping a diary." (p. 84).

Among other things, diarists have learned about learners' attitudes (Bailey 1981); the dissimilarity of our students (Ellis 1989); learners' perceptions of testing and fairness (Bailey, 1981); and learners' level of frustration and needs (Schmidt and Frota, 1986). There is, as mentioned, the added metacognitive value, the raising of language awareness (van Lier, 1995) that comes with paying attention to how and why one is learning or not.

More recently, Bailey, Curtis and Nunan (2001) include teaching diary studies in their professional development framework, including Appel (1995), Numrich (1996), McDonough (1994), and Wong (1994), emphasizing the benefits that language learning and teaching diaries have for language teachers and learners, primarily an ever-increasing awareness of attitudes, processes, and strategies in learning and teaching languages.

Norton (2000), too, uses diary studies in order to examine the learning of English as a second language by immigrant women in Canada. Norton explains that "the model of the diary study that was used in the research had its origins in the consciousness-raising groups associated with the second wave of feminism..." (p. 146). Her research used learner diaries to explore the experiences of the participants collectively.

The value of first-person narrative has taken on a new meaning in the recent work of Pavlenko (1998) and Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000), who suggest a "new metaphor,

# **How research worries can affect research**

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## **Introduction**

This paper aims to present the author's reflections on the problems she encountered concerning research methodology while doing her study for her PhD. As the paper focuses on research methodology, the findings of the research will not be presented.

## **Overview of the research**

The research focuses on investigating whether the revised learner training programme was able to develop students' learner autonomy and was conducted at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) with 59 first year engineering students. It was designed as a case study where the revised learner training programme (RLTP) was regarded as a case. The researcher acted both as a teacher delivering the RLTP and a researcher collecting data to determine if the RLTP was effective enough to develop learner autonomy.

Learner autonomy in this study was defined as students' willingness, confidence and capability to take responsibility for their own learning especially in an independent learning mode. The revised learner training programme, which was created to develop learner autonomy, included psychological and methodological preparation. This aimed to enable the learners to have more willingness, confidence and ability to take charge of their learning independently. The three aspects that the researcher added to the original learner training programme were:

- An environment which encouraged learner autonomy; e.g. freedom in learning such as giving choices of tasks and how to complete them.
- Psychological preparation or how to help learners to develop positive attitudes towards independent learning; e.g. working with their beliefs about language learning, providing the learners with a hands-on experience to engage in an independent learning mode.
- Methodological preparation or providing tools which the learners could use to work on their own; e.g. helping the learners to be aware of their use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies, having them practise using metacognitive strategies, and teaching them cognitive strategies.

## **Considerations for research instruments**

During the four-month fieldwork, the researcher was concerned about how to measure the effectiveness of the RLTP and how to have an insight into the case or the RLTP

being investigated. Although there were no specific research questions to be answered as the research conducted by the case study approach basically aimed at explaining the case (Adelman et al., 1976: 140; Nunan, 1992: 75-76), there was still a focus when the researcher collected the data. Since the researcher focused on the effectiveness of the RLTP, there were three areas that were investigated:

1. How the students changed during the learner training programme. The changes included:
  - attitudes towards independent learning
  - having more confidence to learn
  - developing the use of metacognitive strategies
2. The changes resulting from the RLTP.
3. The extent to which the RLTP was different from the existing learner training programme and whether it was well delivered to cause these changes.

Considering the above areas, which were the focus of this research, the researcher thought about three kinds of instruments that could be used to obtain valid data: 1. self-report instruments that could reveal the data that were not easily observed such as attitudes or motivation, 2. the instruments that could reveal an on-going development of learner autonomy and 3. self-report instruments that could reveal students' use of strategies. In addition, the researcher was concerned about the reliability of the data. Therefore, she tried to use different kinds of instruments and triangulated them. Having done literature reviews on research instruments, the researcher decided to use the following instruments:

1. Pre/post questionnaires, which were used mostly to collect data on phenomena which are not easily observed, such as attitudes, motivation and self-concept opinions. In this study, they were used to obtain two sets of data, before the RLTP was implemented and after it ended. They were used as the main instrument to detect:
  - (1) if the students changed their attitudes towards independent learning.
  - (2) if their confidence in engaging in an independent learning mode increased.
  - (3) if the students changed their attitudes to learner autonomy.
  - (4) if there was a change in the students' use of metacognitive strategies and their behaviour that indicated their self-directedness such as setting objectives in learning, monitoring their learning progress.
  - (5) other factors that might have affected the students' attitudes and/or behaviour after the RLTP ended.
2. A questionnaire asking about students' experience of learner autonomy, which was used to investigate whether the students, while studying in secondary school, had been exposed to any learning condition that encouraged learner autonomy. This involved their teachers' behaviour that reflected their attitudes towards learner autonomy, classroom activities that promoted learner autonomy and facilities provided; i.e. the self-access centre.
3. A checklist of strategies the students used to handle language tasks, which was adapted from the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) devised by Oxford (1990:293-296). It was used both for teaching and for collecting data. Since the students might not know how to analyse and talk about their learning strategies, providing a checklist would help them

# Augmenting the discourse of our research

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## An introductory note on the title

This paper picks up two meanings of the term, *discourse*: first, the broad sense of a domain of language use (as in *political discourse*, *feminist discourse*) and second, the interactional sense of linguistic exchanges between specific people. My suggestion is that we can usefully give some attention to both these areas of the discourse of our research efforts. I have chosen the verb, *to augment*, because I do not want to be heard as engaging in the form of academic argument that insists that others must be dismissed in order for one to have something to say. In terms of the discourse of our research, I believe, rather, that we can usefully work on extending our repertoires. I want to focus on two such possibilities, following the sequence given above.

## Augmenting the discourse of theory and application with a discourse of investigation and articulation

I propose, as an (I hope) unproblematic assertion, that the dominant schema abroad in the world with regard to serious investigation is that *research* produces *theory* that needs to be *applied in practice*. In terms of our own field, and my own work, I am very happy (especially in the context of this conference) to support this assertion with reference to the ground-breaking research into discourse organization carried out by Michael Hoey (e.g. 1983, 2001), the application of which I have found tremendously, and continuingly, useful as a teacher educator (Edge 1989, Edge & Wharton 2001, 2002).

For language teacher-researchers, however, the field of research is not limited to research into language itself. And as we turn our attention to the other process of human interaction and development that are concerned in learning and teaching languages, we find that reliance on the expectation that *research* produces *theory* that needs to be *applied in practice* can let us down badly. The relevant arguments have been rehearsed (and, to my mind, performed and won) too often to bear repetition here. With direct reference to TESOL, I refer the reader to Prabhu (1990), Clarke (1994) and Edge (2001a).

At its simplest, it is not the case that a best method of teaching foreign languages can be abstracted from human experience by researchers, expressed as a general theory, and successfully applied by teachers in various circumstances. That is not to say that there are not shared elements of our common humanity tied up in the processes of language learning — of course, there must be. What is not at all clear, however, is how these common elements interact with the multiple singularities of individual, social and cultural experience — historical, contemporaneous, developmental or emergent. What is also required, therefore, is a complementary approach to research

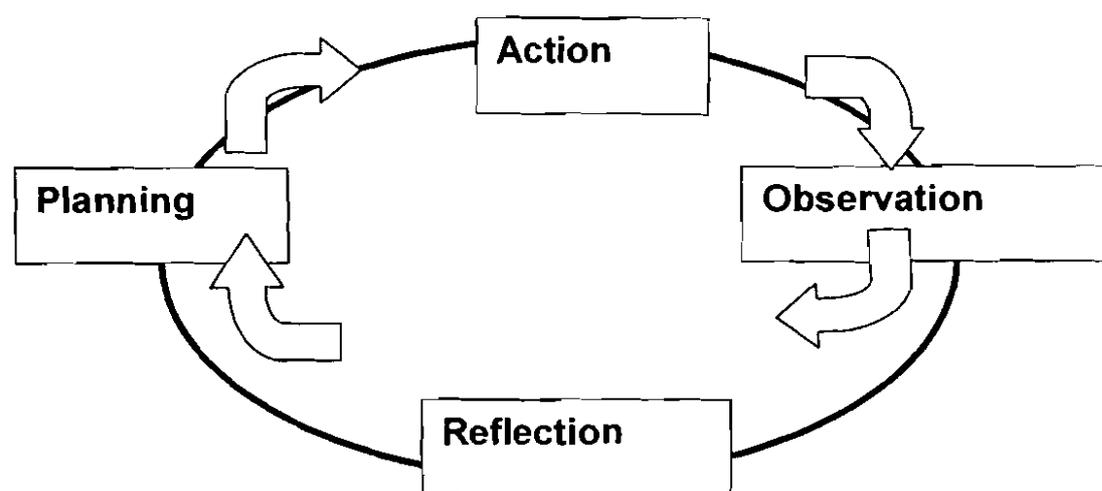
that sets out to investigate specific circumstances of learning and teaching, in order to understand and articulate what has been learned from such investigations. One group of researchers very likely to be able to provide significant insights into each situation are the insiders of that situation, most especially the teachers involved, motivated by their desire to improve their own professional practice.

We have now moved into the frame of action research, an approach which arose in mid-twentieth century work in social psychology (Adelman 1993) and from earlier radical educational philosophy (e.g. Dewey 1933), and has since taken on varying forms in different fields, most particularly educational (e.g. Altrichter, Posch & Somekh 1993, Carr & Kemmis 1986, Elliot 1991, 1993, Carson & Sumara 1997, Gore 1991, Kemmis & McTaggart 1988, Maclure 1996, McTaggart 1997). TESOL has developed its own style of research along these lines (e.g. Allwright & Bailey 1991, Burns 1999, De Decker & Vanderheiden 1999, Edge 2001b, Edge & Richards 1993, Field et al 1997, Freeman 1998, Head 1998, Johnson 1999, Kenny 1993, Nunan 1989, Somekh 1993, Wallace 1998). (For TESOL and non-TESOL examples of action research set in Thailand, see particularly Maneekhao & Watson Todd (2001) and Chuaprapaisilp (1997) respectively.)

My own current working definition of action research runs as follows:

*A rigorous investigation which sets out to improve the quality of experience and outcome available to participants in a given situation, while also enhancing their ability to articulate an understanding of what they have learned, thus increasing their potential to continue to develop in this and other situations, as well as contributing to the sources of knowledge available to others.*

Fundamental to this approach is the basic action research cycle, a non-linear progression through a state of aware involvement in everyday professional action, in which observation leads to some aspect of activity being selected as a focus for investigation. Reflection on this issue, reading about it and discussion of it, lead to the development of a plan to intervene, to innovate. This plan is implemented in fully-contextualized action and its outcomes noted from the perspectives of the various participants involved. Visually:



# What has research got to offer ELT (and what has ELT got to offer research)?

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## Introduction

The first point to make about the questions I have posed in my title – What has research got to offer ELT (and what has ELT got to offer research)? - is that it does not follow that the answers to such questions are interesting. Great chefs have rarely if ever benefited from research into the chemistry of foods, though such research may be vital for the prevention of cancer or allergies. Closer to home, research into language acquisition is of limited value to young parents bringing up toddlers for the first time. Nor is there any obvious feedback the other way. Being a good cook or a good father has only the most indirect effect on research in the areas I have mentioned, if indeed it has any effect at all.

So it does not obviously follow that linguistic research can teach the practising language teacher anything. (Obviously pedagogical research is a different matter, and equally obviously I do not intend to say anything about such research). Nor does it follow that experience in the classroom need have any impact on the development of new descriptions of language. Certainly many major theories of language, most notably Transformational-Generative Grammar and its successors, have not drawn on the experiences, problems and successes (or failures) of the language teacher, and this has not prevented them from flourishing.

That all said, I do not intend to answer the questions in my title in such a way, or else my paper would be very short. I want, rather, to suggest that a number of the most important advances in linguistic research in the past fifty years have been the result of involvement with the day-to-day practices and problems of language teaching. So I will argue that the answer to the question ‘Can linguistic research benefit from listening to the language teaching practitioner (or other kinds of language professional)?’ is that it can, and I will present a range of examples supporting my view that this is the case. Put more briefly, the answer to the question in brackets in my title is going to be a resounding ‘yes’.

The ‘yes’ answer to the question that is not in brackets is however less resounding. It seems to me that language teaching trends have developed largely independently of research into language and that advances in ELT have not been marked by any heavy reliance on linguistic research. Here, too, though, I shall present evidence of some connection, and I will end by briefly offering a potential two-way relationship between linguistic research and ELT in which each benefits from the other.

# Researching reading: navigating the methodological maze

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## Introduction

Reading is a complex mental process that presents a major but fascinating challenge to researchers. Numerous studies have been conducted in the past forty years or so, and both analytic/deductive and heuristic/inductive paradigms have been utilized. Broadly, the first, being theory-driven, is used to seek causal relationships through the collection of empirical evidence while the second, being data-driven, is used to understand processes, often through informants' self-report data. In the real world, however, as many studies make use of both, these paradigms should be seen as extremes on a continuum. Following an overview of theory on information processing, this paper seeks to weigh the merits and drawbacks of each of these research paradigms in terms of their respective abilities to yield data about the reading process. It then discusses in more detail some of the factors researchers need to consider when following a mainly heuristic/inductive approach. Although both first-language (L1) and second-language (L2) reading are considered, the latter is emphasized.

## Shifting paradigms

For much of the twentieth century, behaviourist psychology was so dominant that it had the effect of restricting most research in the social sciences, including both psychology and linguistics, into areas that could be observed and measured. While the resulting empirical data from well designed and well conducted studies may be valid and reliable, it meant that the scope of research was narrowed to a point where mental behaviour, being unobservable and unmeasurable, was considered unresearchable. It was only after Chomsky (1957) argued that the study of language and the mind were intimately related and that behaviourism was unable to account for language processes or language learning that research into reading was resumed after a gap of about half a century. Over the past four decades or so, work in both L1 and L2 reading has been conducted following either theory-driven or data-driven models or both.

A key data-driven model is Ericsson & Simon's (1980) work on information processing. An essential assumption in their theoretical framework is that information is stored in several memories, each having different capacities and accessing characteristics. In addition to several sensory stores of very short duration (e.g., iconic and echoic) are short-term memory (STM) and long-term memory (LTM). While STM is hypothesized to have a limited capacity and to be of fairly short duration, it is relatively easy to access. Simon (1979) found that about 8-10 seconds are all that is required to assemble each chunk of new information in STM and store it as a new chunk in LTM. In contrast, LTM is seen to have an apparently infinite capacity and to allow relatively long-term storage, but it is relatively hard to access. Reviewing data from numerous studies, Ericsson & Simon claim that subjects, when asked to think

# Language set effects in the perception of English and Thai stops

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## Introduction

It is well documented that the phonetics and phonology of a learner's native language can affect the perception and production of his second language (e.g., Weinreich, 1953; Brière, 1966; Curtin, Goad & Pater, 1998; Brown, 2000). Sounds that do not occur in native phonological systems have been found to cause difficulty for L2 learners (Goto, 1971; Miyawaki, Strange, Verbrugge, Liberman, Jenkins & Fujimura, 1975; MacKain, Best & Strange, 1981; Sheldon & Strange, 1982; Best & Strange, 1992). In addition, sounds that are realized differently phonetically in a learner's native language (L1) have also been found to be difficult to perceive and produce (Strange et al., 1998).

One of the cross-linguistic phonological differences that has been widely investigated in numerous studies is the voicing contrast (e.g., Lotz, Abramson, Gerstman, Ingemann & Nemser 1960; Caramazza, Yeni-Komshian, Zurif & Carbone 1973; Williams 1977; Flege & Eefting 1987; Bohn & Flege 1993; Kuijpers 1996; Werker & Pegg 1997). Many of these studies have focused on second language (L2) perception and production of non-native stop categories that do *not* occur in learners' native phonological systems. Other studies focus on L2 perception and production of stop categories that are realized differently phonetically in a learner's native language (Strange et al. 1998).

The current study further investigates how L2 learners perceive non-native voicing contrasts. However, while previous research has focused on learners whose L1 has *fewer* stop categories than those that exist in a target language, the current study assesses the performance of learners whose L1 has *more* stop categories than the L2. Because of this wider inventory in the learners' native stop system, these learners are not expected to have any difficulty learning the target stop categories. It would be sufficient for them just to use their L1 system to categorize L2. The purpose of this study is, however, to investigate whether learners *do* reorganize their phonological inventory when they learn a second language, although there is no need to do so. The second language learners who are investigated in this study are Thai learners of English.

According to Lisker & Abramson (1964), stops in Thai are phonologically realized with three categories of contrast: long-lead, short-lag and long-lag voicing. These three categories are approximately the same as the three total phonetic realizations of English. However, English is a two-category language. Some native speakers of English produce the two stop categories in word-initial position as voiceless unaspirated (short-lag voicing) and voiceless aspirated (long-lag voicing). However, other English speakers

# **Non-directive listening: a tool for structuring classroom interactions and optimising the mediational function of speech**

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## **Introduction to study**

As a teacher I am interested in understanding the context in which I work and the effect of the pedagogical practices I employ. What serves my interests then is classroom-based as opposed to classroom-oriented research; to use a distinction made by Nunan (1992). Classroom research, he points out, treats the classroom not just as the setting but the object of investigation, and the classroom processes become the central focus.

In his discussion of an ecological approach to researching language learning, van Lier (2000) makes explicit the link between approach to research and the way language and learning are perceived. From an ecological perspective the interaction of the learner with her environment is not merely the means by which learning is facilitated, it is learning in a fundamental way. Consistent with this perception, he proposes that researchers should be studying “the relationship between the properties of the environment and the active learner” in order to understand “the opportunities for meaningful action” that a learning situation affords learners (van Lier, 2000: 257).

This study comes out of my experience with an approach to language teaching that is based in the *Counseling-Learning* model. Like the ecological approach to learning, this model challenges a key premise that underlies most views of teaching and learning, that of the scientific paradigm. Inherent in the *Counseling-Learning* approach is a paradigmatic shift to a process model that regards the study of learning as being better served by a holistic or ‘emergent’ approach rather than a ‘reductionist’ one. It likewise perceives learning as a socially derived process and consequently context is fundamental to its study. “Learning is a process of interpersonal dialogue” state Rardin, et al (1988:2), thus they emphasise the “quality and structure of personal relationships” for enhancing that process (Rardin, et al 1988:104).

Understanding, achieved through listening non-directively, plays a central role in the *Counseling-Learning* classroom and affords participants the opportunity for quality interactions; a condition that Rardin, et al (op cit.) propose is fundamental to language and learner development. I have wanted for a long time to examine the interpersonal strategy of non-directive listening ‘in situ’ in order to understand its effect on adult language learners.

The section of the study reported in this paper is motivated by the following observations:

- One of the tasks I favour in my language learning classroom and also as a language learner myself, that of retelling or reconstructing a text, seems to be enhanced when it is structured with a listener understanding non-directively.
- Students seem to make significant changes in their attitudes, and learning behaviour when they have, as part of the classroom procedure, opportunities to reflect on their experience of the classroom in a dialogue with the teacher who understands non-directively.

The questions that follow are:

- Does my preference for reconstruction tasks have an explanation in SLA theory?
- How might the additional structure of a non-directive listener enhance its effectiveness?
- What does an examination of the reflective dialogues reveal about language learning?

In this paper then I will first establish the nature of non-directive listening since it is different from the usual listening that is carried out in everyday interactions. Then I'll describe key notions of Vygotskian theory (sociocultural theory), an explanatory framework for human development that is congruent with the perception of learning underlying this study. I'll then present a stretch of dialogue collected after a reconstruction task as part of a reflective session and examine it with reference to these key notions.

### **Non-directive listening**

In his attempt to capture an essential quality of an interpersonal exchange he calls 'cooperative development', Julian Edge (1992) represents different kinds of interactions diagrammatically in terms of the spatial relationship between the two interacting participants. A conversation is depicted as involving the mutual sharing of two separate spaces while in an argument the space occupied by the participant with the stronger argument is imposed on the other, weaker participant. However, in an interaction that allows for 'cooperative development', the participant who is wishing to understand enters into the speaker's space.

While there are differences in the communicative behaviour that is thought to achieve this kind of understanding, the demeanor implicit in the listener of Edge's 'cooperative development' and that of the non-directive listener is in essence the same; there is a willingness to:

- enter and stay in the speaker's world
- accept that the speaker is 'the knower' of his/her own reality
- be non-judgmental

# **The use of small-scale research studies as a means of investigating language learners' causal attributions for failure**

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This paper looks at how small-scale research studies can offer useful insights to researchers investigating the area of causal attributions. I refer to a study I conducted in the United Arab Emirates, which examined the causal attributions for failure made by university students enrolled in English language courses. After giving a brief background to the study, I will give an overview of those aspects of attribution theory I am referring to in this paper. A fuller account of attribution theory and my study can be found in McLoughlin (2003). I will then describe my research approach. Finally, I will offer some of my findings from my study and discuss the implications for conducting small-scale studies in this field.

## **Background to the study**

I conducted my study at a university for Emirati women in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The participants in the study were second-year students, who were in the English language programme, preparing for entry into the baccalaureate programme. All participants were repeating at least one English language course at the time of the study. For such students, the effects of failure can be serious. If a student fails the same course twice, she is dismissed from the university.

## **Attributions research**

Attribution theory is concerned with the study of common-sense explanations of behaviour, whereby individuals attribute an outcome, an event, or a behaviour to a particular cause (or perhaps to multiple causes). For example, a person may wonder why he or she failed in an exam and identify certain cause(s) to explain the outcome. These causes are the causes as perceived by the individual and may or may not be the actual causes.

Attribution theory is one of the dominant areas of research in social psychology (Fletcher & Ward, 1988), though its application to foreign or second language learning contexts is still relatively unexplored. In recent years, however, more studies have appeared examining the role of attributions in language learning (Tse, 2000; Williams & Burden, 1999; Williams, Burden, & Al-Baharna, 2000; and Williams, Burden, & Lanvers, 2002). It has been described as a useful way of improving our understanding of learner motivation (Williams & Burden, 1999; Williams, Burden, & Al-Baharna, 2000).

In this paper, I discuss one aspect of attribution theory, which attributions people commonly make, and the underlying properties of those attributions. Potentially, there are a vast number of different attributions people could make. However, certain attributions appear to be prevalent. Ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck have often been cited as the most common attributions (Weiner, 1979), with ability and effort seen as the most frequently occurring out of these (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). However, it has also been acknowledged that there are other attributions. Weiner (1992, p. 247), for example, lists "ability, immediate and long-term effort, task characteristics, intrinsic motivation, teacher's competence, mood, and luck" as common attributions in achievement contexts.

Studies in language learning contexts (Williams & Burden, 1999) demonstrate the importance of effort and ability attributions. However, there is some doubt about the importance of luck as an attribution in language learning. In a previous study I conducted (McLoughlin, 1999), luck was rarely cited, while Williams, Burden, and Al-Baharna (2000) report that luck was not mentioned at all. Both these studies were conducted in countries in the Arabian Gulf, so it is not conclusive whether the absence of luck as a causal factor in these studies is due to their cultural context or language learning context.

Weiner's principle achievement was to create a taxonomy of attributions. This involved classifying the different causal attributions along dimensions in order to reveal their underlying properties. The attributions used in this original model (Weiner et al., 1971) were ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck. According to Weiner's taxonomy, causal attributions can be classified according to their locus (internal or external to the individual); stability (likely or not likely to change over time); and controllability (degree of volitional influence people feel they have).

So, a person may attribute failure in a college course to internal factors (lack of ability or lack of effort) or to external factors (the difficulty of the course or bad luck). If a student ascribed failure to lack of ability or task difficulty, these causes might be seen as stable, unlikely to vary over time; if failure was attributed to lack of effort or bad luck, these could be considered unstable and likely to change. Finally, people tend to feel they have volitional control over effort but not over aptitude; therefore, effort can be seen as internal and controllable, while aptitude is internal and uncontrollable. The extent to which individuals can feel that they have control over external causes is unclear.

The attributions referred to by Weiner et al. (1971) have been modified (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). Ability seems too broad a term, and a distinction is now made between aptitude and skills/knowledge. Aptitude refers to an innate ability, which we would think of as a stable, internal cause; skills or knowledge refer to specific abilities that can be learned and acquired, so can be classed as unstable, internal factors. Similarly, effort can be viewed as a stable characteristic (long-term effort) or as an unstable factor (temporary, situational effort). Objective task characteristics is now the term used instead of task difficulty, as the latter can overlap with an individual's perceptions of his or her ability. Finally, chance is now considered a better term than luck because luck is sometimes seen as a stable trait ("I'm just a lucky person").

# **Narrative research: life stories informing ELT**

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The purpose of this paper is to provide an example of how life history research might inform English language teaching. I have been conducting an ongoing study that uses life history methods to explore the experiences of adult Japanese who have acquired intermediate to advanced levels of proficiency in English without having lived or studied overseas. In this paper, I will present the stories of three learners in order draw implications for both English language teachers and learners.

The paper will address five questions: 1) Why was it important to these people to learn English? In other words, what motivated them? 2) How did they learn English? 3) How successful were they? 4) What can English language teachers and students learn from their experience? 5) What are the benefits and limitations of this kind of research?

Before I begin, I would like to answer another question: Why am I interested in doing this study? Bruner (1996) talks about 'folk pedagogy', the understandings that everyday people have about how you learn and teach people things. A common example of folk pedagogy is that, if you want to learn how to speak a language, you should go and live where the language is spoken. Yet, a lot people all over the world learn English without this opportunity. How does this happen? It seemed the best way to find out was to ask people how they did it; in other words, to ask people to tell the story of how they learned English.

## **Methods and procedures**

In language education, narrative research has taken the form of learner autobiographies, diary studies, life histories, and case studies. This study uses life history research methods. Rather than document the whole life story of learners, the inquiry concentrates on one particular aspect: how they learned English. In carrying out this study, I did the following:

- 1) I prepared interview questions based on a review of the literature. [The first item was "Please tell me how you learned English." However, following it was a list of questions divided into the categories of background, learning strategies, autonomy, motivation/goals, language level, formal learning, community/media resources, and general.]
- 2) I selected the participants. [I found participants by word of mouth. There were 2 main criteria for the selection of participants: 1) they had to have learned to speak English in Japan, and 2) their English was good enough to give an interview.]
- 3) I conducted a pilot study. [I interviewed 2 people as part of my pilot study. The greatest benefit of doing the pilot was that it enabled me to revise my interview questions, as well as adjust my procedures.]

# **Investigating learner autonomy in a virtual EFL classroom: a grounded theory approach**

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The aim of this paper is to discuss an education research approach that can be applied when investigating a unique phenomenon or a unique context. In this paper, I suggest grounded theory techniques as an alternative to applying an existing theory to an area of study. This approach may be particularly valuable if limited work has been done in the area under investigation or if the context is unique in some way. In order to discuss such an approach, I give an overview of a research study I conducted at the institution in which I work in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This is a country where higher education has only existed since the late 1960s, and very little research has yet been done in the field of education. In addition, I was investigating a phenomenon on which little research has been conducted at all. I used grounded theory techniques to investigate the extent to which learner autonomy may be promoted through synchronous computer-mediated communication, i.e. internet chat rooms. Although this article describes my research study, the emphasis is on the research methods. A fuller description of other details of the study can be found online in Mynard (2003).

## **Background information**

I conducted the study in 2002 at a university that had been established in 1998 to provide tertiary level education for female Emirati nationals. It is an English-medium university and the faculty are predominantly from Western countries - mainly the United States. The English Language Center delivers a foundation English course which prepares students for entry into the academic programs. This is done by preparing students to achieve a score of 500 or more on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and to reach a required standard on in-house academic tests for reading, listening, speaking and writing. This course of study can take students up to two years.

## **The students and learner autonomy**

The students at the university often experience difficulties with their learning, particularly during their first year. Some of these difficulties are due to a combination of factors. One of the main factors is often the teacher-centred approach to education which students experience in secondary schools. A second factor may be the fact that students do not study English at university through choice, which means that motivation may be low. Finally, the students have not been equipped with autonomous learning skills, a factor that also contributes to their struggle. It is the last point that I would like to focus on in this paper.

# **Enlarging vocabulary size: a collaborative action research study conducted with low proficiency students**

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## **Introduction**

Teachers at the university level in Thailand are required to conduct and publish at least one piece of research a year. In practice, it is quite difficult to do so as the research process sometimes might take a year or more to finish. Apart from time constraints, teaching load and administrative work are other reasons that cause worry to teachers who are not to be able to accomplish the expectation set by the university. From an informal talk with experienced colleagues, I have learned that there are ways for teachers to fulfil their employees' expectations, i.e. using 'classroom based research' or 'action research', which are claimed to be 'empowering' procedures. It is natural, and appropriate, for teachers to develop their expertise by reflecting on ways that can save time and solve the problems occurring while they are teaching (Wallace, 1998: 17).

Nevertheless, for a researcher, working alone to find answers to problems, throwing questionnaires at the students, asking them to fill them in, analysing and showing nice data in a research paper and then submitting it to the publisher might not be a satisfying process. Ideally, the appropriate process is to work cooperatively with students as they are the most important factor. Sharing information and discussing problems together may lead to better solutions in the classroom. Thus, the main aim of this paper is not only to report on how far the students could expand their vocabulary size or how motivated they were in using vocabulary learning strategies but also to reflect how the students and the teachers worked co-operatively to solve the problem.

## **Literature review**

What is action research? Many researchers have given definitions of this term, for example:

"A small scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such intervention"  
(Cohen and Manion, 1985: 174)

"A form of self-reflective inquiry carried out by practitioners, aimed at solving problems, improving practice, or enhancing understanding"  
(Nunan, 1989: 2)

"action research in a positive light, with the aims of presenting

## Striking the right balance between form and meaning in second/foreign language classrooms

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Over the past 20 years, there has been a steady increase in classroom research on second language learning and teaching.<sup>i</sup> Perhaps one of the greatest benefits of this is that it has helped to narrow the gap between research and teaching. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that many of the questions that classroom researchers ask are directly relevant to the questions and goals of classroom teachers. It is also related to an increase in the number of teachers who have become more involved in the research process themselves either in action research projects with other teachers or in collaboration with classroom researchers (Burns, 1999; Nunan, 1989).

The classroom research on L2 learning and teaching that I have been engaged in is specifically concerned with the effects form-focussed instruction. By the term form-focussed instruction (FFI), I mean any effort on the part of the teacher to draw the L2 learners' attention to language form either through instruction or corrective feedback (Spada, 1997).<sup>ii</sup> I am particularly interested in examining the effects of FFI in communicative or content-based<sup>iii</sup> classrooms, hence the title for this paper. Some of the specific questions that have motivated the research that I have carried out with my colleague Patsy Lightbown and others are:

- *Are different types of form-focussed instruction (including corrective feedback) more beneficial than others?*
- *Are some language features more affected by form-focussed instruction than others?*
- *Are there better times to provide form-focussed instruction?*

The question of whether it might be useful (or even necessary) to draw learners' attention to language form in communicative classrooms began to preoccupy me when I was an ESL teacher in the early 1980s. Those were the days when communicative language teaching (CLT) was at its peak. It had almost totally replaced the audio-lingual approach to teaching – at least in North America and in Britain – and it reflected a shift away from an emphasis on language forms to an emphasis on meaningful communication. At that time, I was teaching in an adult ESL program which had adopted a particularly strong version of CLT – one in which the teachers were advised *not* to teach grammar and *not* to correct students' errors. My response to this innovative approach to L2 teaching was mixed. On the one hand, I was delighted to be released from the rigid constraints of audio lingual instruction with its emphasis on repetition, memorization and accurate production. On the other hand, I was not at all convinced that the exclusion of *all* language-focussed activities was a good idea. Of course I was not

# Vocabulary input in English for computer science: a corpus-based approach

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## Rationale

This research project starts from the idea of what vocabulary computer science students need to know. Research into vocabulary teaching has shown that EFL students at tertiary level need to know a minimum of 3,000 words including general, academic and technical terms (Laufer, 1992; Nation, 2001). There is increasing evidence from corpus studies of English to suggest which language items or processes are most likely to be encountered by language users, and which therefore may deserve more investment of time in instruction. In other words, we can get information about which words will be most useful for students of English by looking at frequency counts of vocabulary (Nation 1990: 18).

With the help of the computer science corpus, we used concordanced-based word counts to establish the relative importance of vocabulary items and provided criteria for syllabus selection and grading. We can ensure that the language we present in the courses corresponds as closely as possible to the language that is actually required by students in their computer science area.

## The KMITL computer corpus: design considerations

### Objectives

The purpose of the KMITL corpus was to collect a well-balanced database of computer science written texts, reflecting the reading of undergraduate students in several computing subdisciplines.

### Sampling and the selection of material

#### *Subject domains to be represented*

The contents of the KMITL corpus were designed to reflect the range of subjects in the computing curriculum. The Computer Research Centre Director of KMITL suggested using the summary of common requirements from *Computing Curricula (1991): Report of the ACM: IEEE-CS Curriculum Task Force of IEEE Computer Society* as the basis for deciding what knowledge areas to include within each of ten sub-domain categories (IEEE Computer Society 1991: 23-25). They are detailed below along with an indication of their relative size in the curriculum (shown in brackets in terms of teaching hours).

**AI-** *Artificial Intelligence and Robotics* (approximately 9 lecture hours)

**AL-** *Algorithms and Data Structures* (approximately 47 lecture hours)

**AR-** *Architecture* (approximately 59 lecture hours)

**DB-** *Database and Information Retrieval* (approximately 9 lecture hours)

# Three purposes of triangulation in language teaching research

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## The nature of triangulation

Ideally, research should be both valid and reliable. Although for some research there may be a payoff between these two characteristics making the ideal unreachable, there is one research procedure which, it is claimed, can enhance both validity and reliability. This procedure is triangulation.

Triangulation is a term borrowed from surveying (Brown, 2001). To know the exact location of a geographical point, it is necessary to view it from two different locations. Viewing the point from a single location places it on a line; viewing from two locations places the point at the intersection of two lines. Thus, in surveying, taking measurements from at least two separate locations, termed triangulation, is essential.

This concept of measuring from different perspectives is also important in research. Triangulation, it is claimed, can improve internal validity (Brown and Rodgers, 2002; McDonough and McDonough, 1997), reliability (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989; Wallace, 1998), stability (Freeman, 1998), plausibility (McDonough and McDonough, 1997) and researcher confidence (Freeman, 1998) in research. It can also corroborate, elaborate and illuminate research (Brown, 2001) and allows researchers to gain a richer and less subjective picture of the research (Burns, 1999). This is a lot to claim for a single procedure and triangulation may sound like the panacea for all research problems.

Given the extent of these claims, we should investigate how triangulation manages to achieve so much. The predominant view in the literature is perhaps best summed up by Brown (2001: 28) who states that the aim of triangulation is "to maximize the possibility of obtaining credible findings by cross-validating them". This cross-validation is taken as existing when two or more data sources or methods agree. This view of the purpose of triangulation is so pervasive that definitions of triangulation have been suggested that include the notion of agreement between data sources in the definition. For example, triangulation has been defined as "demonstrating the same findings through different sources" (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989: 105) and "confirming data collected in one way with data collected in a completely different way" (Slavin, 1992: 72). In this interpretation, then, triangulation is more than just using multiple perspectives in research; these multiple perspectives are only considered triangulated when they agree.

There is, however, a second less explicit interpretation of triangulation in the literature. Although coinciding data from different sources strengthens the conclusions we can draw from our findings, the data may also diverge or even be

contradictory (Mathison, 1988; McDonough and McDonough, 1997). In other words, multiple perspectives "do not guarantee accuracy, but at least they counterbalance each other and make it much more difficult to believe in the absolute truth of data taken from any single perspective" (Allwright and Bailey, 1991: 73). The implicit premise behind this interpretation is that there may be no single conclusion that can be 'proven' by agreement between different sources. Indeed, in some areas of research, we may be more interested in how and why the data sources differ.

In this paper, I will attempt to show how a third purpose of triangulation may be achieved. While the first two interpretations of triangulation attempt to shed light on findings, we could also use triangulation to provide insights into the data sources themselves rather than the findings. In using multiple perspectives, we could compare the perspectives to see which one provides the most central and potentially most reliable data source or method.

This paper, then, takes a broad interpretation of triangulation as using multiple perspectives in research. There are three potential uses of this:

1. To identify valid and reliable findings.
2. To compare different findings.
3. To identify valid data sources and methods.

I hope to show how each of these purposes may be reached in practice, and I will do this using the same set of data. Let us now turn to the situation and data I will use to illustrate the three purposes of triangulation.

### **The data**

The data used in this paper comes from a study of classroom discourse. The study aimed to examine topics in classroom language. To this end, twelve lessons were recorded and eliciting extracts from each lesson were transcribed and analysed. Six principal methods of analysis were used:

1. A functional analysis based on Sinclair and Coulthard (1975).
2. An analysis of theme-rheme progression (see Daneš, 1974; Connor and Farmer, 1990).
3. An analysis of given-new progression (see Firbas, 1987; Goldberg, 1983).
4. Hoey's (1991) lexical analysis.
5. A topic-based analysis based on logical relations (Watson Todd, 1998).
6. A topic-based analysis based on associations.

From each of these six analyses, the discourse could be segmented and the placement of discontinuities between segments of discourse compared. Table 1 shows the basis used to identify discontinuities in each analysis (details of the procedures can be found in Watson Todd, 2003). In this paper, I will focus mainly on the locations of these topic discontinuities in the discourse.