

INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR CHRISTINE C.M. GOH

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TESOL International Conventions always offer such an immense variety of lectures, workshops and sessions that it is almost impossible for participants to decide which to attend. But when I saw the programme of the 2012 Convention held from 28 to 31 March in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, one session immediately caught my attention. It was the academic session entitled *Excellence in Language Learner/Learning Strategy Research and Strategy-Based Instruction* co-presented by Anna Uhl Chamot, Xuesong Gao, Christine C. M. Goh, Martha Nyikos, Rebecca L. Oxford and Lawrence Jun Zhang. Being able to participate in this session was a once in a lifetime opportunity for me. Having devoted a considerable portion of my research to learning strategies, I was well familiar with the work of these leading scholars, many of whom have authored seminal publications in the field. However, the speaker whose talk impressed me the most was Christine C. M. Goh. Therefore, I invited her to answer a few more questions for our journal.

Christine C. M. Goh is Professor of Linguistics and Language Education in the English Language and Literature Academic Group and Associate Dean for Higher Degree studies at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. As a teacher educator and researcher her work focuses on the interface between

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linguistic theories and language education. She has published over 10 books and 50 book chapters and journal articles. Her recent book publications include *Teaching Speaking: A Holistic Approach* (with Anne Burns, 2012, Cambridge University Press) and *Language Learning in New English Contexts: Studies of Acquisition and Development* (co-edited with Rita Silver and Lubna Alsagoff, 2009, Continuum). Another recent book, *Teaching and Learning Second Language Listening: Metacognition in Action* (with Larry Vandergrift, 2012, Routledge) is reviewed in this issue of *Strani jezici*. Her main research interests include cognitive and social processes in listening and speaking, teaching and assessment of speaking, listening and pronunciation, speaking-writing relationships, language learner metacognition, and language teacher cognition and teacher learning.

One criticism often voiced against research in SLA is inconsistency of findings or feeble evidence (often attributed to different methodologies, subjects, lack of study replications). Such criticism seems to emanate from your work as well. Can you elaborate?

It is not a criticism for me but rather a note of caution. There are many rigorous studies in the field of second language learning which have enriched our understanding. Each study in itself is very valuable and collectively these studies have helped us deepen and broaden our knowledge of different topics in our field. A problem sometimes arises when we want to compare the studies more closely in order to draw some generalisations. For example, many individual studies compare learners of different proficiency levels in a particular area of skill learning such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. But because many of these studies used different measurements of proficiency, we are often unable to make definitive statements about general patterns that emerge from these studies. This was my own observation when reviewing research in some areas of language learning (Goh & Zhang, 2013 and Nakatani & Goh, 2007).

Is second language acquisition/foreign language learning highly individualistic? If so, what is the purpose of research, especially quantitative?

Environments and contexts play an important role in facilitating language acquisition and so it is important that these characteristics are taken into consideration when designing a study or interpreting the results. The approach to the study and the research design will depend on the research objectives and questions. It is all about fitness for purpose. Each approach will yield findings that can inform the field. The more important concern is that the design and the entire research process is a rigorous one.

The perspective on listening in the second/foreign language classroom has changed considerably in the last twenty years. To what do you attribute these changes? How successfully have the results of recent research studies been translated into classroom practices around the world?

I believe the genesis of these changes can be traced back to the time when second language teaching and learning began to focus on learner-centred approaches because of the work by scholars such as Anna Chamot, Rebecca Oxford, Anita Wenden and Andrew Cohen, and specifically that by listening scholars such as David Mendelsohn, Joan Rubin and Larry Vandergrift. Language teaching has for some time seen a focus on communication and skills development as a result of communicative language teaching methodology. Although listening came to be recognised as a language skill to be practised and learnt in its own right, I think it was only when these scholars turned the spotlight on how students learn and comprehend that we saw shifts in the orientation of listening pedagogy. The listening classroom is now more than just a place where learners practise listening. It should also be a place where learners can learn to be effective listeners by managing both top-down and bottom-up processes in order to improve their own performance, confidence and motivation. Anecdotal evidence suggests to me that we are seeing some changes in listening classrooms in different parts of the world, but a greater paradigm shift is clearly needed. A challenge remains in getting the message out to all teacher education programmes for pre-service and in-service teachers.

The approach to listening that you advocate underscores the role of metacognitive knowledge. In the context of metacognitive instruction, what is the role of the learners' age?

Age and the process of maturation naturally have an effect on an individual's metacognition. Nevertheless, young language learners have been shown to be capable of reflecting on and reporting some aspects of their metacognition (Goh & Taib, 2006; Goh & Kaur, forthcoming). To help young learners develop greater metacognitive awareness, teachers can prepare age appropriate metacognitive activities to enable them to focus on themselves as listeners, the sounds of the language they are learning as well as strategies for listening well. We must not underestimate children's ability to learn actively this way.

What is your view of 'strategic competence'? How would you define it?

My own understanding of the construct and the value of strategic competence has been deeply influenced by the works of Canale and Swain (1980), Færch and Kasper (1983) and many of the strategy scholars I mentioned in 3. It refers to language learners' ability to compensate gaps in their linguistic knowledge with other resources so as to enhance the effectiveness of their communication, and it includes their ability to manage and direct cognitive and learning activities through executive processes such as planning, monitoring and evaluation. In my opinion, this progressive refinement of the construct of strategic competence by scholars has been greatly influenced by our growing understanding of the construct of metacognition (Flavell, 1979) and its inextricable link with thinking and learning.

I hope you do not mind my borrowing one of the discussion questions from your latest book, because I am very interested in finding out what your view is. "Is there room for explicit strategy instruction in the classroom?"

My answer is 'Definitely yes', but I need to qualify this by saying that the most effective form of explicit strategy instruction for listening is an embedded one. In other words, learners should be taught strategies in the context of a listening task and the strategies must be shown to be

relevant to achieving specific comprehension goals. Teaching students a list of strategies without any relevance to a communicative task or goal is not meaningful to them. Some learners will also feel that the instruction is redundant and a waste of time because they already know many of these strategies from their first language (Chamot, 1995). However, when selected strategies are included as part of a pre-listening activity, a sequence in a listening task or other relevant components of a listening lesson, learners will appreciate the value of these strategies and learn to apply them in the context of the task demands.

What are the avenues of future research on second/foreign language acquisition, and particularly on listening?

In an article I wrote some years ago (see Goh, 2005), I identified a number of possible directions for listening research and I think some of these may still be relevant today. These include:

- Learners' person knowledge, particularly listening self-concept should be explored for its effects on listening comprehension, anxiety, motivation and learning to listen.
- The effect of discourse knowledge, particularly of specific types of text or genres on listening performance
- The relationship between knowledge about discourse structure, routines and listening performance
- Young second/ foreign language learners' listening behaviours, skills and metacognitive awareness.
- Higher forms of listening expertise such as critical and therapeutic listening by second/foreign language speakers in instructional and social/work-related situations as well as other specific occupational contexts.

In addition, there could be more across-construct studies for listening and reading, both of which are receptive language skills.

On behalf of the readers of Strani jezici, thank you very much!

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