

## ***Language Learning Journal* Audio Interview**

*Recorded on Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> January 2010 at the Institute of Education*

1. How would you describe the ***Language Learning Journal*** and what are its aims and scopes?  
– Norbert Pachler

The ***Language Learning Journal*** is a journal of the Association for Language Learning and has existed in its current form for some 15-20 years. It's only been a Routledge journal since 2007, before then it was produced in-house by The Association and it's important to mention that because the history of the journal informs to some extent, how we see the journal positioning itself in the market so particularly this means that we try to ensure high quality of submissions and contributions for practitioner readers as well as academic researchers and that finds expression in the aims and scope of the journal as well as the nature and the types of submission we would encourage. To give you a specific example, we don't necessarily feel that submissions have to be very strongly empirical in nature, by that we mean very detailed analysis using statistical measures maybe of quantitative data. We are very happy to receive submissions that also focus on qualitative aspects of language learning and teaching and are more theoretical and conceptual in nature and not necessarily narrowly empirical. Given this focus on practice as it were, but evidence informed practice, we cover a range of interests. We focus on foreign languages other than English, by and large, so we are not another EFL/ESL journal necessarily.

So classroom practice in all its aspects and forms, classroom based research is very important to us. We are very interested in methodological questions concerning teaching and research but we are also interested in policy questions and theoretical questions, indeed one of the things we are trying to achieve is to bring together research, policy, theory and practice more closely. Our readers might be teachers in schools, they might be researchers, they might be teachers in university language departments, they might be policy makers, so we try and cater for a wide range of interested parties and offer to them interesting papers that illuminate aspects of pedagogy and theory. In recent years, we have started also to offer Special Issues in order to enable us to deal with certain aspects in more depth and around focussing policy, theory and practice. These special issues focus on a range of these topics, so for example very recently we had a special issue on Primary Modern Foreign Languages, which is a very important topic at the moment not only in the UK but also beyond. We're very interested to broaden the scope and we're also interested in not only the main foreign language being taught such as French, German and Spanish, but we are very keen on diversifying, into what is sometimes called "less widely taught" languages, or languages of the wider world. In recent years, quite a considerable increase in submissions around Chinese as a foreign language for example, or the so called community languages of the UK. Coming back to these Special Issues, I mentioned that we recently had a special issue on Primary Languages; there will be a second volume to that coming out very shortly but we've also had Special Issues focussing on learning strategies, on vocabulary teaching, learning and research, but also on language policy and practice in South Africa. So, as you can see, a wide range of different topics being covered with a strong focus on the language classroom and the teaching and learning of languages therein.

## 2. Who reads the *Language Learning Journal*? – Norbert Pachler

That is an important question for us because one of the things that we are always trying to do is attract as wide a readership as possible. We are no longer a journal which focuses mainly or exclusively on foreign language teachers and student teachers and teacher educators in the UK, although these readerships continue to be very important to us, but we are increasingly wanting to make sure that we reflect other phases of education and other sectors of education as well. So we are hoping that we are also increasingly attracting colleagues working at university level in language departments there, and indeed we have set it as one of our priorities that we broaden our scope in those directions. Since we have been published by Routledge we are very proud to say our readership has internationalised considerably and the journal by virtue of having become available online is being taken up by very many university libraries internationally all over the world and the statistics would suggest that our reach is now truly international and teachers, lecturers, policy makers, researchers, from all over the world read the *Language Learning Journal*.

## 3. What kind of papers are you interested in? – Douglas Allford

Well if we can look at theoretical papers that would be useful. Questions are 'why theory and why theoretical papers'; well in this context theory refers to general ideas which provide the conceptual framework within which empirical research is conducted and without the clear and robust conceptual framework, empirical research may well become detached from its wider purposes. To start with we can point out that no single theory or set of theories exists about second language or foreign language learning on which there is a consensus. In most areas of language study in fact, there are various and different theories to be found and often these theories conflict, and it follows that there is a need for debate. Presenting opposing views in debate can lead to a greater understanding of second language teaching and learning. Also it can provide a challenge to the prevailing orthodoxy in a particular area. The prevailing orthodoxy is often determined by government and government advisers and so public academic debate on theories or the rationale behind language education policy can provide the chance for teachers and researchers to influence that policy, perhaps. Just one final point about theory, it might become very abstract, but nonetheless, it should always be possible to relate theory to the concrete practice of second or foreign language teaching and learning.

## 4. What kind of papers are you interested in? – Elspeth Broady

As an Editor I think the first thing I would say is we're looking for a paper that is well written and clear, now that is fairly self evident. Once we've got that, because that's what will lead us in to reading the paper, we are obviously looking for something that's relevant to our readership. Relevance then to language learning and teaching. And we are particularly interested in foreign language learning, situations, context, learners; so the teaching of a second language outside of its context of use. Now obviously a lot of work is coming in looking at learners of English as a foreign or a second language, we're very interested in those issues, but we do want to see people who have

considered how issues arising from that kind of context is generalisable to other contexts of language teaching and learning. So well written, of interest to our readership, and here's a really important one: we need to be looking at papers that are properly contextualised within a theoretical and a research framework. We'd be delighted to get papers that are reflecting attempts to innovate in teaching, what I might call action research. Anything that we look at must have clearly taken into consideration the design of the teaching intervention, and the research and the interpretation must reflect the existing literature. In other words what's really important is that we're not reading things which are attempting to reinvent the wheel. So we are looking for papers that are both innovative and convincing in that they reflect a very good, solid command of the existing literature.

The theoretical framework and the literature review needs to clearly influence any empirical study that's being reported. This is something that sometimes we read, we read a lovely idea, somebody reporting a great idea that they have put into practice; in their teaching they've collected appropriate data and they have written it up in an interesting way, but what sometimes happens is people then add on at the end a literature review or a theoretical context, and unfortunately the gaps start to appear so what we are always looking for is that empirical research is clearly determined, pushed forward by the theoretical understanding that's motivated it.

Those things are key then. The other thing that's important to us is that the context of any research is clearly identified. When you're writing up your research it's all too easy to imagine that the readers out there are the people you work with and the people you're familiar with and the people who are familiar with your context. We're dealing here at the *Language Learning Journal* with an international readership so writers do need to ask the question, 'when I'm writing up my research, will the terms that I'm using and the context I'm dealing with be understandable to people who might be half way round the world?'

The literature review, and this is a very obvious thing, needs to take into consideration the current state of the literature. We sometimes have papers that come in that talk about recent research and then in brackets give the citations from the 1990's, and I'm afraid that provokes slightly angry comments from Editors. Literature reviews and discussions also need to demonstrate that the literature that's being considered, that the research that's being thought about, has been very carefully considered, and has been weighed in terms of its relevance to the research that's being reported. Again, sometimes what happens is that people will skim over a particular piece of literature that they wish to review, and they won't notice that for example it applies to first language learning and not second, and again that's the kind of thing that will cause Editors to say, 'there's something wrong here with this paper'.

We need also to make sure that people have thought very carefully about the literature they review in terms of whether it is actually research or simply professional opinion. It's fine to quote professional opinion so long as we understand the value of that and the way that it influences then studies that have been designed and then reported. And I think this is really the kind of nitty-gritty of an Editor speaking, but we are also very, very sensitive to people checking their papers before they hand them in. Before they submit them please do check. It's checking the bibliographical guidelines, its checking figures and statistics. Our first objective as Editors is not to reject, but to try to understand what the author wants to say, what the author wishes to communicate to the language

teaching and research community. And we do often try to work with authors to clarify their message and to support them in trying to get that message across clearly.

#### 5. What makes a good paper? – Douglas Allford

Well, in this instance we'll look at a good theoretical paper and some of the features which one would normally expect to see in a good theoretical paper. The topic - it should be an important topic and ideally one that is current; under that heading we can have recurring topics or new ones. Recurring topics could cover things like explicit grammar instruction or at what age to adopt a vocational approach to teaching foreign or second languages. A new topic, relatively new anyway would be online foreign language teaching and learning. The next step, having chosen the topic, is that the author needs to summarise the various sides in a debate, and this implies of course that the author has knowledge of the main literature that is relevant and fairly recent. There may of course be historical texts, seminal texts to which he or she refers.

The next point to make is that the author will of course have his or her own views, but it's important that he or she sets out the arguments pro and contra, clearly and fairly. For example the author may be a strong advocate of explicit grammar instruction, but nonetheless he or she would need to identify the main objections to explicit grammar instruction in order to address them. Next, the author will set out to expose the main flaws in the position with which he or she disagrees. Having done that, he or she will set out the merits of her own position, his own position, and reach a conclusion. And it's important that, in a theoretical paper, the conclusion should have implications for second and foreign language teaching and learning. In other words that theory should not be divorced from practice.

#### 6. What makes a good paper? – Elspeth Broady

I think a good paper is one that is both innovative and convincing, in other words it has something new to say, but is convincing in that it understands what else has already been said. It's important if we, for example, take a report of a piece of empirical research, that that research reflects a clear understanding of what has gone before and an extremely solid construction of a theoretical framework; solid and critical, in other words that the author has reviewed and thought carefully about how other people have framed the problem and that that is clearly informing the research that then is reported. And I think context is the important word again, that because the *Language Learning Journal* is an international journal, readers will not always have the implicit understanding of your context of research that people around you might have, and so it is important to give full details of the context in which you conducted the research so that others can understand exactly what you did.

Clearly we check statistics, we do look and make sure that numbers add up and we are very concerned to ensure that two things have been covered in empirical papers, that is that the research design of the paper has been carefully thought out and justified, and inevitably with research however good, there are going to be limitations, and we do look for authors in empirical papers to

be clear about the limitations of their study. Clear conclusions, clear contextualisation, and clear indication of limitations and indications of further research.

7. What advice would you offer prospective contributors? – Douglas Allford

A prospective contributor should have in mind the readership for which he or she is writing. The journal is an international one, it's not just UK-focussed, and the articles should be of interest to foreign language teachers and researchers. The second thing is that the contributor should be aware of the aims and scope of the *Language Learning Journal*, and he or she can read about that inside the back cover. The *Language Learning Journal* is peer reviewed, it is published by a major publisher, Routledge, under the auspices of the Association for Language Learning in the UK, so submissions which are successful will be of a high standard. There are notes to contributors published in the journal; contributors are advised strongly to read these and to comply with them having read them. Also it's a good idea to read previous issues of the *Language Learning Journal* so as to get a feel of what it is we publish. The language in which the piece is written has to be clear and to an acceptable standard, so it's always advisable to get a colleague to read through your final draft, or your first draft that you submit. This is particularly important if the prospective author is not a native English speaker – get a native English speaker to read through your draft.

8. What are your aspirations for the future of the journal? - Norbert Pachler

One of the developments that I'm particularly keen on and pleased with, is the fact that the journal will very shortly be joining the ifirst scheme which means that we'll be able to significantly increase the turnaround time of submissions, not just for prospective authors, but also of course for our readers to ensure very high topicality of the contributions that we receive. In essence this will mean that the period of time between the Editors signing off on any contribution on the basis of advice received from their reviewers to the papers appearing in press, will be a matter of weeks now which we are very much looking forward to as an editorial team. And we continue of course to work with Routledge to make sure that we can stay abreast of any technological innovations that might help us develop the scope and reach of our journal. We have in recent years, increased from 2 to 3 issues, which is a very exciting development for us because it means we are able to publish more papers and we're also able to increase the frequency with which we publish which is of course of great interest not just to our authors but also to our readers, so they don't have to wait quite as long for the next issue to come along.

In terms of the way we see the journal developing, we are very keen that from the very strong base-line that we have, through the journal, we continue to broaden not just the interest in, but also the understanding of, issues around language learning and language teaching internationally. Therefore we want to broaden the international scope of our journal even further, and that we are trying to do in three main ways; trying to attract increasing international readership, authorship, but also membership of our Editorial Board. If any listeners out there are interested in getting involved in the

journal we would obviously be delighted to hear from you vis-à-vis possible membership of our Editorial Board.

And the other future development which I have already alluded to is mainly around the broadening of our scope, trying to provide additional opportunities for colleagues working in less widely taught languages and give them an opportunity to disseminate their findings of their own work in those fields through the journal as well. And finally, is the possibility to offer opportunities for interested parties to propose Special Issues to us and put themselves forward as Guest Editors of such issues.