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Form-focused instruction: An interview with Nina Spada

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ABSTRACT

In this interview, form-focused instruction, research methods, and future research questions in SLA are discussed with Professor Nina Spada. The interview took place in December 2016 with the help of Yecid Ortega. Together with form-focused instruction, Spada reflects on the following topics: teacher research, replication studies as instances of creative research, amount of instruction with young learners, and issues in content and language integrated learning among other crucial topics in language learning.
Keywords: form-focused instruction; vocabulary; research; amount of instruction; translanguaging.

RESUMEN

En la presente entrevista, la Profesora Nina Spada se refiere a la enseñanza focalizada en la forma gramatical, métodos de investigación y futuras preguntas de investigación en el campo de la Adquisición del Lenguaje. La entrevista se llevó a cabo en diciembre de 2016 con la colaboración de Yecid Ortega. Junto al tema central de la entrevista, Spada reflexiona sobre los siguientes temas: la investigación docente, los estudios de réplica como formas de investigación creativa, el tiempo de instrucción en niños, y cuestiones relaciones con el aprendizaje integrados de contenidos y lenguas, entre otros temas cruciales.
Palabras clave: enseñanza en la forma; vocabulario; investigación; tiempo de enseñanza; translingüismo.

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PROFESSOR NINA SPADA is known worldwide through her co-authored book How languages are learned (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). In Argentina, and certainly elsewhere, teachers read this book in their undergraduate courses as an introduction to second language acquisition and ELT teaching approaches. Readers will find Spada's most influential publications following this link.

In December 2016, AJAL Editor Darío Luis Banegas approached colleague Yecid Ortega, based in Toronto, and discussed with him the possibility of interviewing Professor Spada. She accepted the invitation and Yecid was forwarded a set of guiding questions to structure the interview. In early 2017, Yecid sent AJAL the audiorecording of the interview, which was transcribed with the assistance of Llewelyn Hopwood, a British Council language assistant from Wales working in Esquel, southern Argentina.

Readers will find that form-focused instruction is the trigger in this interview. In 2008, Spada and Lightbown opened their influential article saying that "[t]here is increasing consensus that form-focused instruction helps learners in communicative or content-based instruction to learn features of the target language that they may not acquire without guidance" (p. 181). The authors move on to say that

> When learners produce language under conditions of time pressure or competing demands on attention, they may reveal that the underlying internal grammar of their interlanguage has not been substantially affected. Even if this is the case, however, learners' ability to use language with greater accuracy and fluency—at least in some circumstances—can contribute to language acquisition in several ways (Spada & Lightbown, 2008, p. 183)

In the article cited above, the authors conclude that lessons which focus on form and also integrate a focus on meaning and communication enhance learners' language development. Professor Spada returns to this idea in the conversation which follows and from there she reflects on the contributions made by studies on form-focused instruction not only in second language acquisition (SLA) but also in teacher education, and ways in which teachers' practices can been transformed by attention to both form and meaning in classroom settings. As she explains her views, she refers to language awareness research (see Leow, 1997, 2000) and how it relates to focusing on form and meaning.

The interview then moves on to other areas, particularly how teachers can contribute to a better understanding of language learning and language teaching through ecological research, i.e., research which occurs within the dynamics of regular teaching and learning practices in context. In this regard, ecological research is materialised through classroom and action research where small-scale studies are based on particular contexts and in-depth analysis of instructional conditions and development (see Burns, 2010; Dikilitaş & Griffiths, 2017). Together with teacher research, Spada puts forward insightful comments on mixed methods (see Brown, 2014) as a holistic research framework to capture the richness of

language learning and teaching in different contexts.

Last, Professor Spada shares her views about concepts such as translanguaging (see García & Kleyn, 2016; Wei & García, 2013) and issues around the distribution and concentration of instructional time in language learning, particularly with young learners (see Collins & White, 2011; Serrano, 2011).

It is hoped that this interview helps AJAL readers approach language learning and research from a closer perspective as we bring Professor Spada's voice through a friendly and inspiring conversation.

Yecid Ortega: You have done research in the area of focus on form. How can we conceptualise form-focused instruction?

Nina Spada: Well, when I originally defined form-focused instruction (FFI), that would have been 1997, in an article in Language Teaching Research, I defined it as being any attempt to draw the learner's attention to form, either pre-emptively or spontaneously, within an overall context of meaningful communicative interaction. So, my definition of form-focused instruction was always one about embedding a focus on language within a communicative context. Not everybody's definition is the same and, unfortunately, sometimes the same term is used differently. So, for example, Rod Ellis's definition of form-focused instruction is broader than mine; it includes attention to form within communicative practice as well as in more traditional structure-based approaches to language teaching that focused exclusively on form. But my definition was how to draw learners' attention to form within communicative instruction.

YO: Now, based on your experiences and those of other colleagues of yours in the field, what have been the major contributions that focus-on-form studies have made to second language acquisition, that is SLA?

NS: I think the major contribution that focus-on-form studies have made to SLA, particularly to instructed SLA research, is that a focus on both meaning and form is essential. That's the short answer to the question! For a long time, as you know, in the field of second and foreign language instruction, there was an exclusive emphasis on forms, on grammar, and that was represented in teaching methodologies such as grammar translation and the audio-lingual method. If the focus was not exclusively on language forms it was primarily focused on language forms. Then we had a shift in language teaching - a shift toward primarily meaning-based instruction, communicative instruction, and sometimes the pendulum swung really far. For example, in the strong version of communicative language teaching it was argued there was no need for a focus on form or error correction as evidenced in the writings of Stephen Krashen. So, the pendulum swing was extreme in some

cases- from an exclusive focus on forms to an exclusive focus on meaning. The research investigating FFI has indicated that neither an exclusive focus on form nor an exclusive focus on meaning is best – it's the combination that is most effective. That leads to the question as to what the best balance is between a focus on form and a focus on meaning? The general consensus in the literature based on over thirty years of research is that there should be a primary focus on meaning with form embedded within it but questions remain about the timing, and the way to focus on language within meaning-based instruction.

YO: To what extent have studies focused on isolated and integrated form-focused instruction contributed to language teacher education and teaching practices? Do you think that such studies are helping to revisit the knowledge co-constructed in language teacher education programmes?

NS: The question about isolated and integrated form-focused instruction has to do with whether there are different times in the pedagogical sequence that might be more helpful to learners than others. And this I think resonates with teachers and is relevant to their concerns because it is fundamentally quite practical in nature - should I separate language focus from communicative practice in my lessons or integrate the two? Interestingly, teachers have been talking about this for a long time and there are several arguments that have been made in support of isolation and integration. Some teachers argue that it is necessary to focus on them separately because learners need to understand language and then be able to figure out how to use it. There are also psycholinguistic arguments to support this which have to do with the fact that separating form and meaning is helpful because sometimes learners, particularly low-proficiency learners, have difficulty focusing on both at the same time - the cognitive demands are too great for low proficient learners who always go for meaning first. But there are also arguments for combining form and meaning-based instruction. For example, one argument is that learners can benefit most from language-focused instruction at precisely the time they need it, that is, when they are trying to communicate their meaning. The claim is that if they receive language-focused instruction at that time they will be able to make form/meaning connections more easily.

So, there are arguments for both isolated and integrated form-focused instruction. However, there is only a handful of studies that have investigated the effects of these two approaches on second/foreign (L2) learning and this includes some of my own research. These studies have looked at the acquisition of grammar as well as the acquisition of vocabulary, and of the few studies that exist, what they have all found is that both isolated and integrated FFI are beneficial. I consider this to be "good news" because when Patsy Lightbown and I conceptualised the constructs of isolated and integrated FFI in 2010, we weren't thinking that one was better than the other and that you had needed to make a choice between the two. On the contrary, in conversations and surveys carried out with teachers and

learners it is evident that both isolated and integrated FFI are valued and it is believed that there are different times in a lesson and pedagogical contexts when one is preferred over the other. This view is consistent with our own understanding of the two constructs and the results from existing research on the effects of isolated and integrated FFI on L2 learning confirm that both are beneficial. Nonetheless interesting questions remain such as, are there better times to isolate a focus on language and are there optimal times to integrate it with meaning-based instruction/practice? So, for example, one might argue that isolated FFI is particularly helpful when the students share the same first language (L1) background; say they're all Spanish speakers learning English as a foreign language and they're all making the same mistakes with possessive determiners, (i.e. his/her). In cases like this with learners who make persistent errors that are clearly related to their L1, that may be an appropriate time for isolated FFI, On the other hand, there are other language features, for example articles in English, that are quite complicated and the rules for their use is not straightforward. In cases like this perhaps the best approach is to embed articles within communicative practice. The assumption is that through language use, through seeing the form used in a variety of meaning-based contexts, learners will figure it out for themselves.

YO: Now, let's move on to your article in 2011 that you published entitled "Beyond form-focused instruction: Reflections on past, present and future research." In the conclusion, you seem to suggest that a research question worth exploring was "What do we know about learner's awareness of form-focused instruction and corrective feedback?" Since 2011, have you noticed any interest in research towards this area?

NS: My recollection is that the question I asked in that article was about the capacities that the L2 learner might (or might not) have for form-focused instruction. For example, we know that learners approach learning languages in very different ways. Some learners have a more analytical orientation they love grammar rules and analysing language and figuring out how the grammar works. Learners with more of an analytic orientation - and this is an element of overall aptitude for language-learning - might actually benefit more from FFI because they are oriented towards wanting to know how language works and so are more likely to pick up on language-focused instruction (and corrective feedback) even when embedded in communicative practice. So, in that sense, there can be an interaction between type of instruction and type of learner. This moves us into a discussion about more specialised domains of research where, for example, some researchers are investigating learner aptitude in relation to different types of instruction and corrective feedback. There's another angle to this question which has to do with learners' awareness, probing questions such as what do learners notice when they are engaged in form-focused instruction or receiving corrective feedback? One researcher who has done quite a bit of research on awareness and learner noticing is Ronald Leow. He's done some interesting studies in which

he observes learners in the process of language learning and uses 'think-alouds' and 'talk-alouds' to get an understanding of what they're noticing while they receive different types of instructional input.

YO: Right, now, as regards classroom research in applied linguistics, how can teachers contribute to research and their own everyday practices through more ecological research designs?

NS: This is a difficult question because most teachers don't usually have the time, the support, or the resources to do research – at least formal research. But when one thinks about teachers who are reflective in their practice and who are engaged deeply in their practice, it is evident that teachers are testing hypotheses in their classrooms all the time, and so in that sense they're researchers, they're doing informal research every day as they try things out with their students, as they see what works, what doesn't work, how they might be able to perfect this, how they can change that. So, teachers on the ground are doing research that primarily informs themselves and perhaps some of their colleagues.

But when one thinks about teacher-researchers, that is, teachers who have the support, opportunity and resources to do research I think the answer to your question is that they be encouraged to pursue small-scale, action-based research in their own classrooms focusing on local issues, local questions, local challenges, and where detailed descriptions of students, teachers, learning, curricula are described in very specific ways. The more local studies that document teaching and learning in particular situations with specific learners with specific goals, the greater the chances one might be able to generalise to other contexts and if not, the research maintains its importance, relevance and applicability in that context.

YO: In terms of research methodology and SLA, have SLA studies been creative enough in your opinion? What kinds of research methods should be explored further?

NS: I think there's a great deal of creative research methodology in the SLA literature. But what your question might be getting at is the dichotomy that exists between qualitative-quantitative approaches to conducting research, positivist-interpretivists dichotomies etc. Sadly, often what happens is that researchers working within their particular paradigm stay in their own camps and reinforce their own thinking. In my view, more creative methodologies would include approaches like mixed-methods, which help to break down barriers between methodological approaches and examine ways we can combine research methodologies as opposed to seeing them as incommensurable. I also think we also need more studies that are longitudinal in nature. So much of SLA research is cross-sectional. This is understandable because it's time consuming and expensive to do longitudinal research but it is important to think creatively about how might be able to do more of this.

I'm going to say something that sounds like it's in complete contradiction to research creativity, and that has to do with replication research. Replication research doesn't sound creative at all - a repetition of what somebody else has already done. But I would argue that replication research can also be creative. First, there are different types of replication research: exact replication, virtual replication, and partial replication. And the truth is that doing an exact replication study is virtually impossible because SLA research uses human participants. Thus, it's always going to be creative in the sense that researchers are working with new populations of learners with their individual distinctive personalities, in new settings and contexts. Even though replication research does not allow for as much creativity as other research methodologies, it serves the very useful purpose of confirming or disconfirming what we have found in previous research.

YO: If you were to ask future generations of SLA researchers three questions you'd like them to investigate, which three questions would you ask them?

NS: Well, one which is obviously close to my own work is the question of how we can best combine a focus on language and meaning/content simultaneously. This is becoming increasingly important as many countries in the world are moving in the direction of providing English-medium instruction in schools - where the goal is to have more speakers of English the lingua franca. Parents are willing to invest significant time, effort and money so their children will learn English and increasing numbers are attending English-medium instruction earlier in their lives. Often what happens in these situations is that the children don't have enough knowledge of the second/foreign language to be able to cope with the subject matter instruction. This is a challenge that educators are facing throughout the world. In Canada we face this challenge with immigrant children who are integrated into English or French-medium schools and are submersed into a curriculum delivered in a language they have not yet learned. Often they do not receive the language support they need because their teachers are subject-matter teachers not language teachers. They want to make sure the children learn social studies and history and mathematics in order to succeed in school. But if they don't have the language support this will not happen. The question as to how to best combine a focus on language and a focus on content to ensure that learners are going to learn both is urgent. Think about the growing number of CLIL (Content and language integrated learning) programmes in the world, where in Europe, Latin America and in Asia, children, adolescents and young adults are being asked to learn subject matter in a language that is not their first often with teachers who do have an adequate command of the language themselves. So, in my view the need for continued research to investigate how to best combine language and meaning/content-based instruction is very important.

Another issue that is related to some of my earlier research has to do with the amount of time that it takes to learn a second or foreign language. We know it takes a lot of time and yet, learners are given very little time to do so in the school setting. Children spend thousands of hours learning their first language yet when we look at children in second/foreign language programmes in schools, they typically receive 30 minutes a day three or four days a week spread over many years. One of the ways to provide learners with more time is to develop immersion programmes or bilingual education programmes, but that's not always possible or desirable. Another decision that is increasingly made throughout the world is to start second/foreign language instruction earlier. The problem with this option is that in most cases, learners continue to receive small amounts of instruction which is not sufficient to successfully acquire the second or foreign language. In fact the bulk of research shows no support for an early start in schools when the amount of time is limited. Research has shown that instead of lowering the age at which children start learning an additional language in the school curriculum, it is better to wait until later and intensify the instruction. For example, some studies have shown that learners who receive an intensified period of instruction over six months do better than learners who receive the same amount of instruction spread over several years. There is research in Canada to support this as well as similar research investigating different concentrations of instructional time in Spain and the Netherlands but more studies are needed. It is important for me to say that while starting early may not bring significant linguistic gains when there is no substantial increase in time, there may be other advantages. Starting early can have advantages for sensitising learners to other languages and other cultures early in life. It may also motivate learners to want to learn about other languages and other cultures. More research is needed to investigate these questions as well.

The third area of research that I have recently been thinking about relates to the notion of translanguaging. While there are different definitions, interpretations and practices associated with translanguaging it is fundamentally about the benefits of using languages already known/available to the learner in the learning of an additional language. One example of this is the use of the learners' L1 in L2 learning. This has been shown to be very helpful with minority language learners immersed in majority language contexts (e.g. immigrant learners mainstreamed into English-medium schools in Canada). The benefits are evident in terms of acknowledging and accessing learners' cognitive and linguistic abilities already established in their L1 and valuing their cultural and linguistic identities. To my knowledge, less research has been done to systematically investigate how translanguaging is implemented in the classroom and how it contributes to learners' first and second language development. It is important to know for example, whether learners who are in classrooms where translanguaging is practised make further progress in their language development than learners who do not have that opportunity. I would like to see research focused on this and related questions.

YO: Professor Spada, thank you very much for your time and reflections.
NS: You're welcome.

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