Torrin Shimono & James Nobis

TLT *Interviews brings you direct insights from leaders in the field of language learning, teaching, and education—and you are invited to be an interviewer! If you have a pertinent issue you would like to explore and have access to an expert or specialist, please make a submission of 2,000 words or less.*

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Welcome to the September/October edition of TLT *Interviews! For this edition, we are happy to bring you two interviews that discuss language learning through the learners' social constructs and personal histories. Our first interview is with Diane Larsen-Freeman, who will discuss the role that Complex Dynamic Systems Theory has in Second Language Acquisition. The second interview is with Judith O'Loughlin, who shares her knowledge on education for students who have experienced interruptions in formal education. So, without further ado, to our first interview!*

Diane Larsen-Freeman is Professor Emerita and former Director of the University of Michigan's English Language Institute. She is also Professor Emerita at the Graduate SIT Institute in Vermont and a Visiting Senior Fellow at the University of Pennsylvania. Her most recent books are Complex Systems and Applied Linguistics *(2008, with L. Cameron), the third edition of* Techniques and Principles *(2011, with M. Anderson), and the third edition of* The Grammar Book: Form, Meaning, and Use for English Language Teachers *(2015, with M. Celce-Murcia). She was interviewed by Bob Ashcroft. Mr. Ashcroft has lived and worked in Poland, Germany, and Cambodia, and currently teaches International Communication at Tokai University in Sapporo. He has a master's degree in Applied Linguistics from Birmingham University, and the Cambridge Diploma in English Language Teaching to Adults. His research interests include CALL, vocabulary acquisition and corpus linguistics. You can find out more at http://www.bobashcroft. com.*

An Interview with Diane Larsen-Freeman
Bob Ashcroft
Tokai University

Bob Ashcroft: *How did your time teaching English in Malaysia influence your subsequent career?*

Diane Larsen-Freeman: I went to Borneo to teach English to school children with the US Peace Corps in the 1960s. When I flew to Malaysia, it was only the second time I had been on an airplane! Earlier, as an undergraduate, I had majored in Psychology because I was fascinated with how people learn. But it was my time teaching in Malaysia which aroused my interest in the learning of languages, in particular. I had a great two years in Malaysia, then headed back home with a clear idea that I wanted to study language learning. Other scholars interested in second language learning at that time began a coalescence around a new field, which was subsequently called "second language acquisition." It is this field that I have been most professionally aligned with ever since.

Could you outline Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST)?

CDST attempts to account for the emergence of novel complexity from the parts of a system as they interact dynamically with each other within a particular context. The classic example is a flock of birds. As the birds interact, a kind of flock super-organism with its own complex behavior emerges. It is the same with language. It is an emergent system which results from individuals interacting together. Twenty years ago, I was struck by James Gleick's (1987) writing that the act of playing the game has a way of changing the rules. Gleick was not discussing linguistic rules. Nonetheless, I reasoned that when individuals "play the game," (i.e. interact using a language meaningfully) they end up changing the rules or patterns of that language. This process applies to different configurations and to different timescales, for example, to the shared understanding of individuals in conversation, to the emergence of dialects in speech communities, or to the evolution of language over time.

How does viewing Second Language Acquisition (SLA) through the lens of CDST help?

One way is that CDST recognizes the importance of context, in contrast to a lot of SLA research that treats context as simply incidental background information. In addition, it suggests that a more appropriate name for our field is second language *development* instead of second language *acquisition* (Larsen-Freeman, 2015). The word "acquisition"

makes language sound like it is something ingested, that it is finite, and that there is an end point. But all language users, even native speakers, continually develop their language resources throughout their lives. Replacing "acquisition" with "development" is significant because it reflects the unboundedness of the process. Understanding that language is an ever-changing dynamic system, achieving stability, but never stasis, has important implications for teaching.

What does it mean for teachers to cultivate a CDST perspective?

Well, I think it is helpful to conceive of language as a dynamic system rather than as consisting of a set of relatively fixed rules and vocabulary lists. Because teachers naturally teach in a way that is consistent with their conceptualizations, what transpires from a relatively fixed view of language is "the inert knowledge problem." That is, students know about language, but they cannot use it for their own purposes in communication. In order to accomplish the latter, students must engage in using the language meaningfully for them.

The second point is to underscore the systemic nature of language. A systems perspective encourages us to think relationally. For example, new language points should not be introduced to students in isolation, but instead should be framed within the language system. Introducing new points is not simply additive; it changes the learner's system. Furthermore, a system perspective implies that there need not be a set order of presentation, contrary to the way most language textbooks present atoms of language in sequence. Indeed, research from a CDST perspective convincingly demonstrates that students chart their own developmental trajectories; each is unique and quite distinct from any instructional order.

How can a CDST viewpoint influence classroom practices?

If we want our students "to play the game," it would be helpful to have practices that are meaningful and engaging. Moreover, they should be iterative (not repetitive), in which students get to revisit the same territory over and over again. For example, using the same activity from time to time, but changing its parameters each time will renew the learning challenge for students at the same time giving them the practice that they need (Larsen-Freeman, 2013a). I also think that we should be teaching students to take their present language resources and to adapt them, i.e., learn to mold them to changing situations (Larsen-Freeman, 2013b).

A systems perspective goes well beyond how we view language. For example, it can help with classroom dynamics. I am sure that all of your readers will have experienced a class in which a great deal of their attention is directed at a single student. I call it the *sore tooth syndrome* because one's tongue always seeks out that tooth, when all the other teeth are performing as they should. It is the same in a class of students: the teacher typically devotes a lot of attention, and perhaps worry, to that one student, when the rest of the students are doing fine. If you view the classroom and the students as a system, then a different approach is warranted. For example, you do not have to tackle the problem by yourself. Perhaps you could get the other students to enlist the problematic student in a more positive way, or you might attempt to understand how factors outside of the classroom are contributing to the student's inappropriate behavior. Importantly, a CDST relational perspective would offer that an optimal way to handle such a situation is to allow yourself to be transformed. As for complexity theory, Ricca (2012) observes that we usually recommend that teachers get to know their students in order to move them along on their learning trajectories. However, a CDST approach requires teachers to be transformed themselves as result of the mutual influence of teachers and students.

Can a systems perspective still work in an educational culture where students are typically quite passive such as in Japan?

Absolutely. All teaching takes place within a context, which, as I said earlier, is not simply a backdrop, but an integral part of a system. In Japan, the context is such that it can be culturally appropriate for students to be silent as a sign of deference to the teacher's authority. Teachers have to be sensitive to that context. The student, the learning process, and the context are inseparable. So, if you understand the classroom as a system, and you understand the cultural background as part of that system, then you can work within it. Indeed you can work with it to change the dynamics and to get the students to take on a more active role, if that is what you think will develop their capacities. That is exactly what effective teachers do, but they need to allow themselves to be transformed as well, not simply to impose their own expectations. After all, they, too are an integral part of the system.

How is the relationship between a student and teacher reciprocal? What are the implications for teaching practice?

People naturally adapt to each other in social situations, either converging or diverging. In CDST, the mutuality is acknowledged in the term "co-adaptation," just as you and I are doing now. Teachers, too, have to co-adapt with their students. This is the basis for everything which follows. That is why I still find the first day of teaching a class quite stressful. The relationship-building aspect has to be genuine; students will know if a teacher is feigning interest. If you do not build a converging relationship with your students, then your effectiveness will be more limited. You don't have to be best friends, but you do have to establish a relationship of mutual trust and respect with your students.

What would you say to teachers who feel that they are leading their students to water, but that their students are refusing to drink?

Gert Biesta (2007) wrote that research and theory can tell you what has worked, but not what works. Ultimately, it is the teacher's present responsibility, using all the resources of the system, to find a way. As the well-known language teaching methodologist Caleb Gattegno always said, "It is the students' job to work on the language, and it is the teachers' job to work on the students." You have to find something which engages students. Maybe they can write, or use a computer, or do a project outside class. By trial and error, maybe a topic that interests them can be identified, or reinforcing their agency (Larsen-Freeman, 2019); maybe they are given an assignment to find one. Also, you have to think relationally, rather than in terms of individuals. Maybe a student can find a classmate with whom they can work well together. The key to motivating your students might be different for each one, and that makes it difficult, but that is your job as a teacher. Teaching is not easy but can be very rewarding.

According to CDST, the journey to fluency in a second language is unique to each individual. What are the implications for teachers?

Teachers have known for years that each student is unique. The average does not characterize any individual student; means are simply statistical measures of a group. Because each student's journey is unique, the teacher's role is to help students relate to their learning and to make their own connections. Although the path of language emergence is different for each student, it occurs firmly within a social context as it comes about through interaction with others. I have always said that the role of teacher is as a manager of learning. There is a lot of talk about learner-centeredness, but I believe we should talk in terms of learning-centeredness. Of course, effective teachers focus on their students, finding ways to motivate them, but this is ultimately in the service of learning, which is our quest, after all.

Thank you very much for an enlightening interview!

My pleasure, Bob! There is so much more about CDST that interests me. In fact, as I have written recently, its lessons continue (Larsen-Freeman, 2017) and have transformed the way that I think.

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To the second interview! For this interview, we bring you a discussion with Judith O'Loughlin. Judith O'Loughlin is an independent education consultant and author with 25 years of experience as an ESL and special education teacher. Her areas of expertise mainly lie in teaching K-12, adult and graduate levels in the United States. She recently published a book titled "Students with Interrupted Formal Education: Bridging Where They Are and What They Need" and gave a plenary presentation at the JALT International Conference, 2018. She was interviewed by Frazer Smith, an adjunct lecturer based in the Tokai area. His research interests include language learning motivation, multilingual identities, and ICT.

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