

UCLA

Mester

Title

Second Language Acquisition, Bilingualism and Identity: An Interview with Merrill Swain.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/35j5v9n8>

Journal

Mester, 33(1)

Authors

Rell, Amy
Rothman, Jason

Publication Date

2004

DOI

10.5070/M3331014604

Copyright Information

Copyright 2004 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

Second Language Acquisition, Bilingualism and Identity: An Interview with Merrill Swain

Amy Rell and Jason Rothman
University of California, Los Angeles

The Matthews lecture is an annual lecture in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at UCLA made possible by an endowment from the philanthropic alumna Lois Matthews. This lecture is not only the most prestigious lecture held by the department, but also has the explicit intent of celebrating the diversity of academic interests throughout the campus while focusing on issues that directly pertain to the department. This year was the first time that the Matthews lecture had a linguistic theme. Accordingly, great effort was devoted to choosing a speaker who would be able to capture the essence of cutting-edge linguistic research while also providing valuable information to a diverse audience. Given that the majority of courses offered by the department are language classes, the department extended an invitation to a prolific researcher whose emphasis is in applied linguistics. It was with great pleasure that the department of Spanish and Portuguese invited Professor Merrill Swain from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto to discuss her research on second language learning and acquisition.

Professor Merrill Swain, who received her Ph.D. in experimental psychology and psycholinguistics from the University of California at Irvine, is a world-renowned researcher of bilingualism, bilingual education/immersion, and language pedagogy and methodology, among other areas. Dr. Swain is perhaps best known for her extensive publications on the immersion education system in Canada as well as her influential Output Hypothesis. This hypothesis asserts that language production has a fundamental role in the process of acquiring a second language, as opposed to being merely a byproduct of acquisition. Professor Swain has received many honors throughout her career. She has been elected by her peers to serve as the President

of the American Association of Applied Linguistics (AAAL) and is currently the Vice-President of the International Association of Applied Linguists (IAAL). This past April, she was once again recognized and bestowed the Distinguished Scholarship and Service Award by the AAAL. Professor Swain's lecture entitled, "A Language Learning Strategy: Production before Comprehension," was an enormous success.

Mester: Dr. Swain, could you tell us about your educational background, how you became involved in the field of second language acquisition, and about your early work in the field?

Merrill Swain: I did my B.A. at the University of British Columbia. I was originally from Vancouver but I moved away and I was determined to go back to British Columbia to do my B.A. It is such a gorgeous place to live. I completed my B.A. in economics and psychology. I chose economics because I was really talented in math. They say, if one is good at math, success in economics follows. At the time, I enrolled in economics classes with lots and lots of men and I got the highest grade! [Laughter]. This resulted in the university hiring me as a statistics T.A. in economics during my third year of school, which is just unheard of.

Thereafter, I wasn't decisive about what I was going to do and it looked like my best chance was to be a secretary. My brother said to me, "You know, I think what you should do is apply for graduate school." He said, "What are you interested in?" It turned out my answer was in computer simulation of human behavior. There were two places in all of North America that did computer simulation of human behavior. One was UC Irvine and the other was the University of Alberta. The University of Alberta offered me a wonderful scholarship but as you know, Alberta is very cold! The University of California offered me a TAship and remissions. There was just no choice for me.

When I got to California, both of the professors involved in computer simulation were on sabbatical. Because it was such a new university, they had hired a new dean. The Dean, who was a brilliant man, didn't think it would be a good idea to have the school of social sciences aligned in the usual way. He told the graduate students that he wanted us to align ourselves with the faculty and figure out who we want to work with and why. He added that we could make whatever groupings we wanted. At that particular point, it was probably one

of the most exciting times at UC Irvine. I joined one of three groups called the language and behavior group. There were a couple of anthropologists, an economist, some psychologists, maybe a linguist, I'm not sure, and we spent a lot of time together. The faculty was told it was a good idea to do as much cross-disciplinary work as possible. To be honest, I was really lucky. There was so much cross-disciplinary work, I've never really labeled myself anything like a psychologist or an anthropologist. I just know a lot about all of those areas. That is, this experience served me very well.

M: It must have been nice to not feel pigeonholed into one particular area.

MS: ...the research methodologies and the way people go about asking questions are different. Today, Susan Plann introduced me as an experimental psychologist and in some ways I was. I did have to run experiments. When it was time to get my first job, it was important to me that I had all the quantitative skills ... the ways of analyzing quantitative data. I believe this training aided me in obtaining my first job. Now, however, my interests have changed. For so long, I looked at things from a quantitative perspective. I now realize there is so much missing if you don't get that qualitative aspect. I think I was lucky to have learned quantitative analysis first and then moved into qualitative analysis. I find that many people only know the qualitative aspects and are afraid of quantitative work. That's a pity because I believe the best work combines them both.

M: The field of second language acquisition (SLA) has changed drastically over the years. Having been at the forefront of research through its development, what do you feel has been your greatest contribution?

MS: I started and continue to do research in immersion. If I had the opportunity to go through an immersion program starting at six years old, I would be a fluent bilingual ... but I'm not. I regret it. I made attempts, however. For my doctoral research, I intentionally chose to do something with bilingualism so that I could live in a bilingual environment and therefore "learn French." My French is fairly good but I would never call myself bilingual. When I got

the opportunity to be involved in evaluating immersion programs, I thought it was just the perfect job for me. I felt that immersion programs may be the answer for kids learning French in school. I was very passionate about this research.

Around this same time, there were riots at the universities in the [United] States. Students were very unhappy and I didn't think being a professor was a good idea. The job that I obtained put me in OISE (Ontario Institute of Studies in Education) but without a teaching position. I was there as a researcher and it truly was the perfect experience. It was exactly what I wanted to do, without knowing that ahead of time. It all occurred by chance. About two years later, a faculty position opened and I knew it was time. I've been at the University of Ontario ever since. I continue to do different things. Therefore, to answer your question, I believe that I've had a real impact on immersion programs in Canada. Because of the publishing we've done, other worlds know about it as well. As a result, the English immersion program in Japan is modeled after the Canadian system. The initial immersion program in the United States was modeled after the program in Canada. My career has turned into something that I would have never in a million years thought it would because immersion turned out to be such a good idea. There were so many questions immersion raised and so much research it has led us to do.

M: You've received many accolades throughout the years. What recognition are you most proud of?

MS: I actually have two I would like to talk about. One is from the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers. They are the only such pan-Canadian organization and they bestowed upon me an award for distinguished service to second language teaching in Canada. This thrilled me, given that it was a pan-Canadian organization. It was recognition of having worked in Canada. I do take my Canadian citizenship very seriously. The second award, I received just last week. The American Association of Applied Linguistics gave me their distinguished scholarship and service award.

M: This edition of Mester is dedicated to the topic of identity. Based on your experience as a Canadian citizen and researcher of immersion studies with Canada, could you comment on the

connection between language and identity from this perspective? What are the attitudes of the people towards the two major languages in contact, French and English?

MS: Of course, the situation has greatly changed over the thirty years that I have been doing this. The first thing I want to say is that Canadians are very proud of their bilingualism, even if they themselves are not bilingual. They are proud of the fact that we are a bilingual nation. One of the reasons we are so proud of our bilingualism is to distinguish ourselves from the United States. It certainly is part of our identity. One could say that Canada is a bilingual country whereas America is a monolingual country. This is something that has actually created part of Canada's identity.

When the separatist movement gained steam, one of the reasons the Canadian federal government worked so hard to maintain French, to keep Québec in Canada, is because it is so much a part of our collective identity. Certainly, there are other economic reasons. Both Canada and Québec would be in financial ruin if separation were to occur. However, one negative result of Canada's bilingualism is that we pay less attention to the other languages spoken in Canada, of which there are many. Toronto is supposedly the most multi-lingual city in the world. This means that the French get funding for ESL (English as a Second Language) and English speaking Canadians get funding for FSL (French as a Second Language). Many other languages are left behind. It is true that in some provinces there are Ukrainian immersion programs and Mandarin immersion programs, but being officially bilingual, French and English get the majority of the focus. In fact, if I had known thirty years ago that I was going to be living in Toronto, you know what language I would have studied? Portuguese, as this is the native language of the great majority of my neighbors. Conversely, if I had thought about what would be the most financially viable language to learn ... Mandarin ... Spanish maybe? The point being, to a certain extent, to be officially bilingual has constrained Canada in some ways. Having said that, bilingualism is definitely part of our identity.

M: Would you say the sentiment you are expressing right now would be shared by the people who live in Québec? Do they embrace English as well as French as being part of their identity?

MS: That is a very good question. No. But I do think it is changing. We have gone through this separatist movement and it has been decided that it will not happen. Now the world is moving on. The focus is on different issues like the economy. The previous generation in Québec was very anti-English. In general, why learn English? This generation, the kids in high-school now, want to learn English. They want to learn English because it is no longer a threat to them. Before, it was as if they thought that learning English would equal losing French. Now French is solidly part of all of our identities. It is solidly part of who they think they are. Consequently, learning English is not the same type of threat it was twenty years ago. My sense is that in Québec, there is a much more favorable attitude towards learning English today. Moreover, when I had the occasion to speak to French Canadians, they would say “we have to learn English too.” That’s just it ... the “too” that is part of it. I am sure, however, that one is still able to find many suffragists in Québec.

M: What is your view of the importance of minority language retention when two languages come in contact as they do in Canada with French and English or in the United States with Spanish and English?

MS: Would you like me to discuss only the relationship between English and French?

M: If you would speak about what you know best, the readers can relate your opinion to the situation of Spanish and English in the United States.

MS: I think minority language retention is absolutely crucial. I think the reason that Canada is now more of a whole than it was before is due to the fact that for a long period of time there were so many protectionist movements ensuring that French was preserved in Québec. The fact that Québec did not spend a lot of time worrying about French in the rest of Canada was due to their primary concern with its conservation in Québec. Of course, there are minority pockets of Francophone communities throughout Canada.

There are maintenance attempts being made in Canada through bilingual education programs. Politically, I do not think we would be

where we are unless Québec had gone through this successful attempt to preserve the French language, strengthen it, and make people aware of the fact that this is their language and we are not taking it away. No one is going to take it away. No one is going to let it disappear. As a result, I think people are more secure about their own identity and language as a result of all of the political steps that have been taken.

The reason why I asked you about the parallel with Spanish is because we are a better country now for having gone through this struggle of minority language retention. My intuition is that maybe the same steps should be taken for the Hispanic community in the United States. I don't know how this could be done but I think this is important.

M: In your work on French immersion, you argue that despite ample amounts of input, traditionally viewed as audible linguistic stimuli, adult second language learners seldom achieve native-like proficiency and thus benefit from instruction with focus on grammatical forms. Why do you believe that adult second language learners require focus on form?

MS: Well, that is certainly what got me going on the Output Hypothesis. My observation of what was going on in class was that students just didn't get much opportunity to speak. The more I thought about it, I likened it to Frank Smith's work on writing. He argues that you learn to write by writing or you learn to read by reading. The idea struck me that maybe one learns to speak by speaking and does not learn to speak by listening. Comprehending and producing are different processes. The answer to your question is not that people should just produce more. Nevertheless, I do think that there are functions of producing language that are unique and will make a difference in terms of what learners get out of it. Therefore, focus on form is critical because it draws the most attention to those aspects of language, like morphology, that are not necessarily needed to be communicative yet are nonetheless an important part of the particular language's grammar. It is the dialoguing, the speaking, the "languaging", I like to say, that raises people's understanding and consciousness.

M: For the benefit of our readers who are not necessarily familiar with your Output Hypothesis, could you give us an overview of what it encompasses in its most general terms?

MS: Initially, the Output Hypothesis stated that when you produce language, principally a second language, you often are able to recognize that you don't know something. In other words, you can start to say something and recognize that you don't have the linguistic ability to say it. That very act of noticing would lead a learner to then go to another source, a person, teacher or dictionary, to fill in the gap of knowledge. Essentially, the Output Hypothesis was noticed for the fact that it led people to noticing. The notion that you couldn't learn anything unless you noticed it had quite an impact in the second language literature.

Production also has a role in second language acquisition. Learners try out things and they can't possibly try out something unless they can say or write that thing. Hopefully, they receive feedback. People respond to production and the idea is that this feedback becomes an important part of the language learning process.

What I spoke about in the Matthews lecture was the notion that the very act of producing elicits a response. The mere act of producing elicits a response, even if you haven't a clue but rather just an inkling of what you were saying. It turns out that people will respond to you in ways that will give you all types of clues to the actual meaning, even to the actual syntax and grammar, that wouldn't have happened otherwise.

M: Is there any correlation to the Output Hypothesis and the scaffolding effect of language learning that Eleanor Hatch describes whereby through negotiation of meaning, second language grammatical knowledge and discourse emerges?

MS: Yes, but I think there is a slight difference between what Hatch says and what I would say, at least today. Although I certainly think she was an incredible leader in the field, the difference is the notion of input and output as essentially static. In other words, you receive input and it should be input in your brain. But maybe you don't want to put it in your brain. It is the notion of co-construction that I think is the next step beyond input and output. Input and output only get you to a certain understanding of what language learning is all about. I've seen so many examples of students together building a sentence, building meaning. You see them talking about it and they end up with this brilliant sentence. To me, it is parallel to learning

science or history or any other academic subject. While people tend to think of language as a means of learning science or other subjects, they get stumped on the notion of using language to learn *about* language learning and using language to acquire knowledge of language itself.

For me, the reason for having collaboration like the sort that occurs in Communicative Language classes is useful because it gives students the opportunity to use language in order to learn language. When people try to create language for an activity that they have to do later, whether it be oral or written, they therefore talk about language. This is a very powerful tool which aids learning. It is critical to get people to talk about things they care about expressing.

M: You have made a distinction between input, any type of audible speech stimuli, and intake, the input that is noticed and internalized. Why?

MS: It is at this point that the question of agency becomes important. You have to ask yourself, why am I not internalizing some of the input? Is it because of the nature of the input? Maybe not. Perhaps it is because I don't like the way you sound and I may not be interested in sounding quite like you. Maybe I'm not interested in knowing that particular grammar rule because I get along perfectly well with or without it or with another.

M: Finally, in our department, there is a conscious effort to provide the student with as much input as possible. That being said, the only language permitted in the lower-division language classes is Spanish. What is your opinion about foreign languages being taught solely in the target language to the exclusion of the first language?

MS: It seems to me that any stance taken that permits *only* the second language does not acknowledge the role that language plays as a vehicle for cognition. One of the arguments against using the first language is that it will lead to transfer. Another is that it will decrease the amount of input that students receive. The complete counter argument is to say that we use our first language to process our thinking. When faced with a novice situation and you can only speak the second language, the first language will still be used, at least internally. Why not take advantage of the first language?