

12th Annual Research Symposium
TESL Ontario Conference, October 27-29, 2011

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The 12th Annual Research Symposium was held as part of the 39th annual TESL Ontario Conference in Toronto from October 27-29, 2011. The Research Symposium included nine presentations that addressed one of three topics, which included

- *Adult learners – Are we meeting their needs?*
- *Pronunciation in the ESL classroom*
- *Willingness to Communicate in L2.*

The three topics were each presented in three-hour sessions that included time for presenters to respond to questions arising from their presentation and for symposium participants to engage in discussion with the presenters. All three topics were well attended and room capacity (136 participants) was reached for each of the three topics.

A brief synopsis of each of the three symposium topics is offered in the following.

Adult learners – Are we meeting their needs?

Thursday, 27 October 2011, 13:00-16:00 hrs.

Presenters: Jill Sinclair Bell, PhD, York University and Grainne O'Donnell, Toronto District School Board
Ellen Cray, PhD, and Devon Wood, PhD, Carlton University
Kim McDonough, PhD, Concordia University

Presenters addressed the question of whether English language learners' needs are being met from different perspectives. The first presentation focused on identifying and meeting ESL literacy learners' needs. For such learner groups, conventional text-based teaching techniques are inappropriate. In addition to the challenges involved in identifying the needs of these learners, teachers also need to develop a new range of teaching techniques. The challenges ESL teachers face when working with adult ESL learners were identified and potential support system required were discussed.

The second presentation focused on how recent corpus linguistics informed studies to highlight the mismatch between previously held views about language and data from actual language use. Findings presented ranged from differences between spoken and written English, such as the frequent use of non-clausal units in spoken but not written language, and the discovery that both spoken and written language consist of large numbers of formulaic, language chunks with predictable sequences and stable meanings. The presenters concluded with the observation that findings from corpus-driven work are not typically included in pedagogical grammars or textbooks and reflections on the potential reasons for this situation.

In the third presentation, the conversational interactions between preservice teachers and ESL learners were analysed to explore the types of language production opportunities available to these ESL learners. The findings suggest that despite the conversational nature of the meeting, relatively few exchanges involved authentic communication and ESL learners had fewer opportunities to talk compared to the preservice teachers. The presenter discussed implications, especially interactional techniques available to ESL teachers to meet learners' production needs in conversational settings.

Pronunciation in the ESL classroom

Friday, 28 October 2011, 09:30-12:30 hrs.

Presenters: Donna Brinton, MA, University of Southern California
Sara Kennedy, PhD, Concordia University
Ron Thomson, PhD, Brock University

The topic on *Pronunciation in the ESL classroom* explored different ways in which ESL learners' pronunciation of English differs from that of native speakers.

One of the presentations provided data to show what features in ESL pronunciation tend to lead to misunderstandings in interactions with other non-native speakers of English. The findings provided insights for a discussion of how L2 speech might be taught to help avoid the kinds of misunderstandings found in the non-native speakers' interactions. Another presentation was designed to demystify the development of pronunciation abilities in adult ESL learners, thus helping teachers develop greater confidence in their ability to teach English pronunciation. The effects of learners' age and their first language were shown as particularly relevant whereas research investigating cognitive mechanisms involved in speech learning, attention, lexical frequency and orthography was shown to be relevant in suggesting attainable goals for the development of ESL pronunciation abilities. The final presentation on the topic of pronunciation referred to a recent complaint in reaction to an ESL pronunciation course that was offered at an American university. The complaint alleged that the term "accent" was discriminatory, suggesting that the complainant viewed the teaching of ESL pronunciation as an unethical practice.

Willingness to communicate in L2

Friday, October 28 2011, 14:30-17:30 hrs.

Presenters: Stephanie Arnott, PhD candidate, OISE/University of Toronto and
Callie Mady, PhD, Nipissing University
Peter MacIntyre, PhD, Cape Breton University
David Wood, PhD, Carlton University

The topic of *Willingness to communicate in L2* acknowledged the fact that for language learning to occur, learners need to be willing to engage in interaction with other speakers. A first presentation highlighted the elusive nature of the concept of “willingness to communicate” and defined it in terms of a function of temporal, measurable variables of speech such as speech rate, pause patterns, and length of runs between pauses. The presenter also pointed out the scant attention that has been paid to how sociocultural or affective factors such as anxiety or willingness to communicate (WTC) may influence L2 fluency. Examples from a learner corpus served to discuss the connections between fluency and anxiety/WTC.

A second presentation drew on questionnaire results from a study of adolescent English and French language learners who participated in an educational exchange program designed to foster bilingualism. Analyses of data collected through observations, interviews and journal entries suggested that the participants’ willingness to communicate in their second language may have been influenced by situational factors inherent to the volunteer experience such as access to native speakers of the target language and opportunities for authentic community participation.

The final presentation on the topic of *Willingness to communicate in L2* focused on the ‘currents’ that flow through communication to identify broad patterns and longer-term trends. The presenter suggested that studying these currents facilitates a description of the integrated process by which various factors including language anxiety and motivation combine to influence second language learning and communication. Methodological challenges, including difficulties in handling and integrating large amounts of qualitative and quantitative data from individual study participants, the transient nature of the events themselves, and potential cognitive biases were discussed to provide research implications for multiple timescales.

An important outcome of the Research Symposium is the publication of a special refereed issue of *Contact* based on written versions of the oral presentations during the conference. The co-editors of the proceedings, Robert Courchène and Hedy McGarrell have set up a Reading Committee consisting of experts on the topics addressed in the 2011 Research Symposium to assist with reviewing the manuscripts. The due date for manuscript submission for the refereed proceedings is January 3, 2012 and the publication date is expected to be 31 May 2012. The issue will be published through the TESL Ontario website and be available to teachers and language professionals throughout the world, wherever access to the Internet is available.

TESL Ontario wishes to thank Citizenship and Immigration Canada and the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration for their continued support in providing funding for this Research Symposium.