

Higher Education in Language Teaching Challenges and Prospects

Carmel Mary Coonan

Abstract The changing face of society and the new needs and situations of foreign/second language learning impact upon language education programmes and on the very idea of what language education is. Language teaching – the field which has as its focal point of reference language education – must be able to understand the new situations so that answers can be found. In order to do this language teaching requires specialists capable of investigating the issues. This is possible only if they possess and know how to effectively use suitable instruments of enquiry. In Italy the typical academic path followed by the would-be specialists in the field (graduates in foreign languages or *Lettere*) does not, generally speaking, equip them with the specific knowledge and competence to carry out the required forms of enquiry and therefore it is argued that post-graduate training must include a focus on this area.

Contents 1. Introduction. — 2. The Complexification of Language Education. — 3. Language Teaching: A Conceptual Framework. — 4. Enquiry in Language Teaching. — 5. Researchers in Language Teaching. — 6. Prospects.

1 Introduction

The issue of language learning, especially, but not uniquely, **non-native** language learning, has gradually gained impetus in Europe over the last fifty years. The actions and directives from important European organizations such as the Council of Europe and the European Commission are testimony to this increased awareness, and actions at a local level (laws, reforms) concerning national language education policies in school systems also reflect a general concern with the issue of ‘language’. The requirement that the citizens of Europe be in a position to learn at least three European languages (one of which the mother tongue) (cf. European Commission 1995) has naturally led countries to look closely at their systems to accommodate these requirements with, also, an eye to the quality of language learning, sustained in this through the work being developed on proficiency levels, etc., by the Council of Europe (2001). Thus, over the last decades, language teaching and learning has jumped to the forefront of national concerns for the role it plays in the provision of language education.

2 The Complexification of Language Education

Language education is that part of general education that bases its premise on the consideration that language knowledge and proficiency are vital aspects of an individual's life as it permeates every aspect of his cognitive, social, cultural and affective growth. Thus, language education has the overall goal of promoting and developing the individual's innate language faculty, of stimulating his full language potential as a means to allowing him to reach his full human potential.

Language is the **means** whereby education takes place (education **through** language[s]) and languages **are learnt** as part of the educational process (education **in** language[s]). This latter aspect involves the actual teaching of languages, and therefore involves curricula decisions and the adoption of teaching procedures that best enhance the potential of the language education programmes. According to Balboni (2012), language education is:

a process where a person [...] through the educational system furthers his mastery in his mother tongue in terms of his writing competence and his metalinguistic competence (the language becomes an object of analysis, of classification, of reflection thereby contributing to his cognitive education) and where other languages are learnt with the help of qualified specialists.¹

In Italy the educational value and importance of language and languages for man, his role in society and his overall well-being, was recognized as far back as 1912 when Lombardo Radice first referred to the term 'language education' (instead of using the expression 'the teaching of Italian') with reference to the Gentile reform. However, it was only much later, in 1975, with the publication of the *Dieci tesi per una educazione linguistica democratica* by GISCEL that the concept was fully developed and presented as a framework of reference for the development of language education programmes (cf. Balboni 2009 for further references). It was in practice a political manifesto for the enlightenment and democraticisation of schooling for it recognized and denounced the limits of the practice of teaching Italian, where literary models of language were proposed and writing was promoted at the expense of the other skills. It was paradoxically an elitist model of language education for, although the intention was to teach

1 «il processo in cui una persona [...] entra in un sistema formativo, in cui inizia l'approfondimento della competenza nella lingua materna, includendovi le abilità scritte e manipolative e la dimensione metalinguistica (divenendo quindi oggetto di analisi, classificazione, riflessione, in tal modo contribuendo all'educazione cognitiva), e dove altre lingue vengono acquisite sotto la guida di adulti specializzati nel loro insegnamento» (our translation).

Italian (the language of unified Italy) to as wide a population as possible, in fact it failed in its purpose, for it disregarded the fact that the Italians were still coming to grips with the Italian language (in the first half of the twentieth century not only did a considerable proportion of the population speak only dialect but many were also illiterate – Balboni 2009, p. 62). It failed in its purpose because the model underlying the teaching of Italian was inadequate given the characteristics of the population it had to deal with. This because it was out of touch with developments in pedagogy, the educational sciences, linguistics, and language learning theories. The *Dieci tesi* proposed solutions to rectify the educational, social and political failure of this previous ‘model’.

The proposals put forward in the *Dieci tesi* can be seen as rooted in issues of plurilingualism to the extent the manifesto takes on board the problem of mother tongue speakers of dialects having to learn Italian², called attention to the need to use the individual’s language and cultural background as a point of departure for exploration and analysis of linguistic varieties characterizing the linguistic patrimony of members of society, and specified that language education protect all language rights as is specified in the Constitution. The *Dieci tesi* thus demonstrated a sensitivity towards issues concerning L2 situations. With reference to ‘foreign languages’ however, the *Dieci tesi* did not **explicitly** contemplate these as an integral part of language education. Indeed, when published, the *Dieci tesi* attracted criticism for this surprising lack of reference to foreign languages, the presence of which was about to be confirmed as an integral part of the Scuola Media curriculum of the *Nuovi programmi* of 1979.

The concept of language education however is not a static one. It has responded over time to embrace the breadth of diversity that has developed into what is today’s multicultural and multilingual society, registering the impact that this is having in the area of language teaching and learning. The result is that Language Education now takes on board a myriad of issues related to relatively news areas such as:

- Italian as a second language;
- mother-tongue teaching to immigrant groups;
- new foreign languages (e.g., Arabic and Chinese in mainstream high schools);
- new expectations in language learning (higher proficiency levels for the global market, multilingual repertoires, plurilingual competences);

2 Effectively as a second language, though not explicitly stated in the manifesto. In fact, the proposals advanced seem to be reminiscent of reflections and orientations that were characterizing the developing field of foreign language teaching rather than that of mother tongue teaching, e.g., reference to the four language skills, functions, the need to prioritize oral skills, the concept of register, etc.

- safeguard of Europe's minority languages;
- lifelong learning (of languages);
- new teaching and learning environments (e.g., ICT, CLIL);
- teaching for autonomy in language learning;
- intercultural issues;
- new types of learners (e.g., adults, young children, special needs learners);
- new roles of languages (e.g., English as a lingua franca, foreign languages as a medium for teaching and learning, intercomprehension, language(s) for education).

The above examples (by no means exhaustive) illustrate just how the field of language education has expanded and grown in complexity compared to the situation that was contemplated when the ground-breaking manifesto was published in 1975.

3 Language Teaching: A Conceptual Framework

The discipline that occupies itself with Language Education is Language Teaching (LT) also called, in the English-speaking world, Applied Linguistics or Educational Linguistics (cf. Balboni 2012 for a description and critique of the various denominations used in Italy).

LT is a discipline which dialogues with a variety of other disciplines in order to identify the implications that their concepts, theories, principles, constructs might have for its own specific domain. This is an ongoing process which responds to innovation and progress in the diverse disciplines themselves (as well as to contextual, external factors). For this reason, the privileged position that Linguistics (and the dyadic disciplines such as Sociolinguistics, Pragmalinguistics, Ethnolinguistics, etc.) has enjoyed in the past in LT (reflected in the original choice of the term 'Applied linguistics') must be balanced by an awareness that other 'non-linguistic' disciplines feed into the LT domain as well, such as Docimology, Pedagogy, Psychology, the Educational Sciences, the Communication Sciences, just to name a few.

The shortcomings of the use of Applied Linguistics to refer to LT has been well focused by Widdowson (2000) who points out that 'applied linguistics' can easily slip into 'linguistics applied' – in other words into a direct application of concepts, theories and principles elaborated in Linguistics to language teaching. LT occupies an interface, 'filtering', position to ensure not only that this does not happen but also to ensure that all those disciplines that can contribute towards its mission are taken into consideration.

Figure 1 attempts to capture the overall complexity of the LT discipline by highlighting its various dimensions and layers. If we go from right to left we see how it widens its scope from the teaching act proper within a

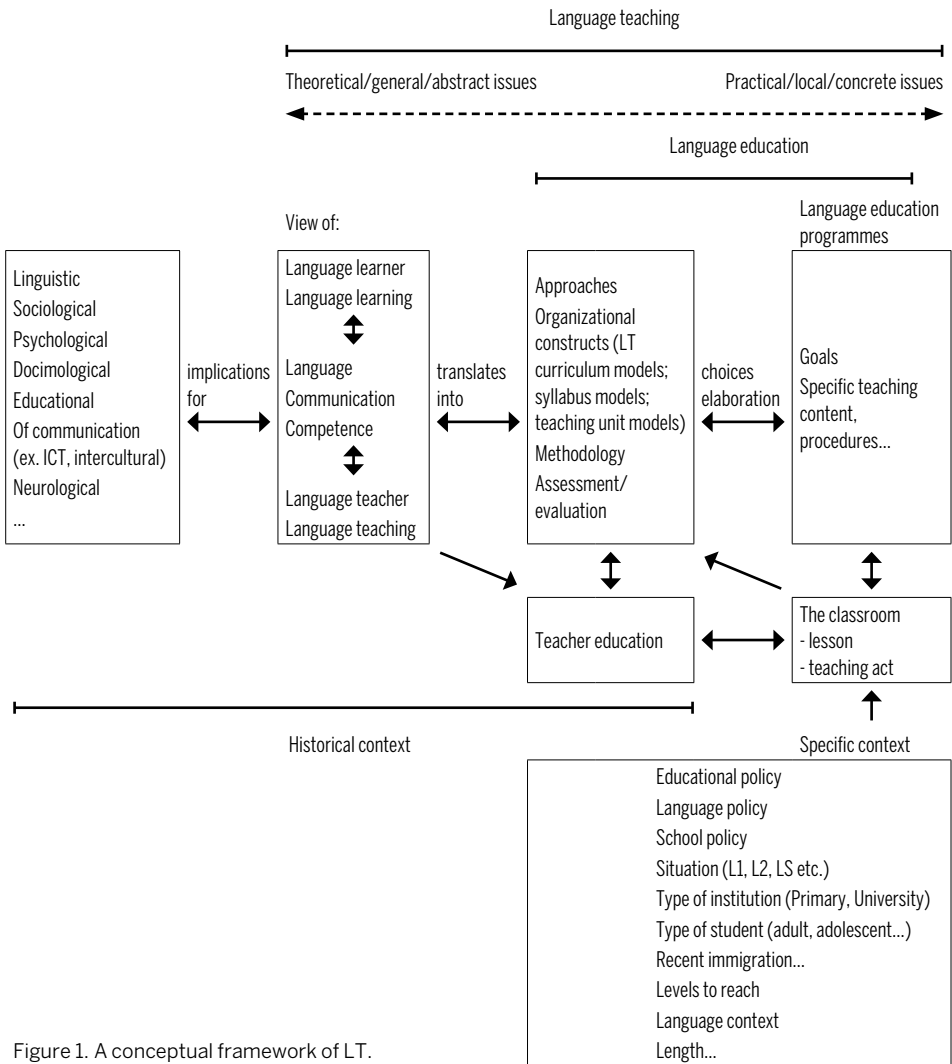


Figure 1. A conceptual framework of LT.

culturally connoted classroom (at the ‘specific’ end of the continuum) to what lies behind the scenes – the principles, concepts, theories which ultimately inform our actions and choices for the lesson in the classroom itself.

As already mentioned, LT is fed by a myriad of disciplines, not only linguistic ones. This cannot but be so if we consider the elements that are involved in the teaching act (cf. Fig. 2), a sort of sum of the effects of the interplay of various elements and factors that have taken shape as a result

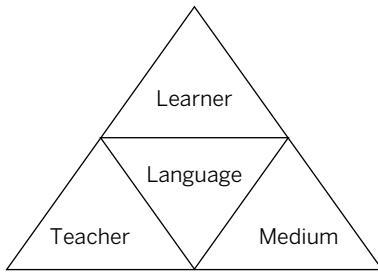


Figure 2. The teaching act.

of the reflections and considerations operated by LT on various aspects of the disciplines to see their implications.

If LT is to be a success, not only the object of learning is to be considered (language) but also he who is learning (the learner), he who teaches (the teacher), the means (medium, message, machine, materials) adopted to channel the learning/teaching and the place and the time the teaching takes place in.

Balboni (2012) groups the 'feeding' disciplines into four macro areas:

- a. the individual and his language faculty, his brain and his mind: the learner (and learning) represents one of the four central variable of the teaching act, pivotal to language education. Disciplines such as Neurolinguistics, Cognitive Psychology, Humanistic Psychology, Theories of Second Language Acquisition inform our planning for promoting learning, our strategies in teaching, choice of learning activities, our understanding and intervention on errors, etc.;
- b. the teacher/those responsible for promoting the individual's language potential: the teacher (and teaching) represents another cardinal point of the teaching act. Disciplines such as Teacher Education, the Educational Sciences, Pedagogy all inform the professional training received and the professional skills in acting;
- c. the individual's language faculty, its development and actualization in terms of language competence. Language competence is a pivotal variable in language education. Disciplines such as Linguistics, Psycholinguistics, Second Language Acquisition, Sociolinguistics, Pragmalinguistics contribute to our understanding of what this competence consists of.
- d. related to the above is the context of use of language: the Ethno-disciplines (Ethnomethodology, Ethnolinguistics), Socio-disciplines (Sociolinguistics, Sociology of Language), the Communication Sciences (ICT; Intercultural Communication) are here involved. Language use does not take place in a vacuum and, as such, it is subject to cultural norms and to technological constraints and potentialities. The development of

language competence cannot take place without an awareness of these influences, nor can teaching decisions ignore them for teaching also takes place in a culturally connoted environment.

The medium represents another cardinal point of the teaching act for alongside the voice of the teacher, we also have that of printed material, technological material and technological instruments all of which impact upon the message and communication in general.

As can be seen in the framework, the issues that the domain of LT is concerned with are both abstract, general and theoretical as well as practical, concrete and specific. Furthermore, reference to the historical dimension in the framework shows that knowledge in the field is intimately linked to the 'state of the art' of the feeding disciplines and also to contextual factors (e.g., school organization, curriculum constraints, local language policies, etc.), such that what was acceptable yesterday has to be revised and rethought out today for tomorrow. In this way, our view of the language learner and the learners' language learning processes changes over time; our view of language as an object of study, of communication, and of what it means to 'know' a (foreign) language changes over time; our view of the teacher and his role, his methodological choices in promoting effective learning also changes over time, and our view of how to teach changes in line with the developments in technology.

4 Enquiry in Language Teaching

The framework above illustrates a complex process of interrelated aspects and influences that, as mentioned, change/develop over time, and thus require a continuing process of understanding and interpretation by specialists in the field.

Speculation and theorizing are important forms of enquiry which can lead to the elaboration of concepts and models and contribute towards the creation of new theories, e.g., the elaboration of new approaches, the proposal of language curriculum models, theories of Language Education, etc., which move knowledge and developments along. However, although theorizing and speculation have their part to play in the advancement of LT, there is a need also to put the proposals to the test through other forms of enquiry which take the form of empirical research.

Empirical research is essentially of two types: 1) theory-driven where the aim of the investigation is to test, validate, or find support for a theoretical principle or concept; 2) data-driven where, rather than having a theory as the point of departure for the research process, theory represents the end result of the investigation. This is typically the case of Grounded Theory

(brief introduction in Richards 2003, pp. 16-18) where the theory ‘emerges’, so to speak, from the data and as such is rooted in evidence and fact (the data itself).

An example of a theory-driven research in the LT field might be the exploration of the effects of ‘focus on form’ (Williams, Doughty 1998) on foreign language learning. The theoretical concept ‘driving’ (motivating) the research is ‘focus on form’ and the associated theory that it facilitates language acquisition.

An example of a data-driven type of research might be the observation of a language lesson to ascertain the effects of the learning activities on language production or the observation of the discourse moves of the teacher (cf. Richards 2003 for a discussion of discourse analysis from the point of view of qualitative research). Analysis of the data will lead to discussion and links with existing theories and research works. Ultimately, it may lead to a new theory or principle.

Of course, all empirical research results are evidence-based. The difference between the two types lies in the focal point of departure driving the study.

With reference to empirical research – whether theory-driven or not – a distinction is usually made between that which is conducted within the quantitative-parametric paradigm and that which is conducted within the qualitative-interpretative paradigm (cf. Brown 1988; Nunan 1992; Cohen 2000; Richards 2003). In the LT field both traditions co-exist, even within a single research project (cf. Dornyei’s ‘Qual-Quan’ proposal, 2007, pp. 24-29; Hashemi 2012).

The quantitative paradigm allows for a focus on product and through careful management of the variables, the sampling, etc., it is possible to generalize the results, through statistical procedures, beyond the actual data itself. A typical example of such research in the LT field is the so-called Methods Research where the test results of an experimental group taught through a new method are compared with the test results of the control group which has continued with the usual method. Also typical are survey investigations which use closed questionnaire items. Or, again, the quantitative linguistic analysis (e.g., for complexity, accuracy, fluency: cf. Ellis 2003, pp. 115-117) of student language production in certain types of learning activities.

The qualitative paradigm, which, despite criticism of its scientific value, is gradually gaining ground in LT, allows for a focus on processes (and this is the real reason for its attraction) and for a deeper understanding of their nature. The characteristics of this paradigm do not allow for statistical generalization but a careful description of the situation under enquiry can allow for an identification of typicality features thereby rendering the specific results of the investigation transferable to other similar or ‘typical’ situations.

With reference to Dornyei's Qual-Quan/Quan-Qual distinction, the above example of the survey, although quantitative, could represent the starting point of a generally qualitative-based research project which uses the questionnaire to collect quantitative data to identify issues that will then be investigated through qualitative-focused enquiry procedures.

5 Researchers in Language Teaching

Historically, in Italy the preferred way of advancing knowledge in the field of LT has been predominantly one of theorizing and speculation rather than through empirical study. There are consequences related to the influence of this tradition as, at the postgraduate level (second degree level *laurea magistrale*, Masters, and the third degree level Ph.D), training in research methods for empirical research for students (predominantly foreign language degree students) wishing to specialize in LT tend to be missing. This is unfortunate as in most universities, in Europe and beyond, provision for such training is available as early as the second degree level and this, of itself, not only provides an indication of the type and level of sophistication of research that is expected even at this level, but also of the type of 'professional' our students will need to compete with as far as regards research and publication possibilities. Today, academia is being called upon more and more to compete on an international level, to work in international research teams and to publish internationally and, with reference to the field of LT, this implies being able to carry out empirical research. Indeed, consultation of international journals (e.g., *TESOL Quarterly*, *The Modern Language Journal*, *Language Teaching Research* – just to name a few within the English-speaking world) gives an idea of the importance attached to empirical study by the international LT scientific community (cf. special issue of TESOL 1995 on this topic).

With reference to research in LT, it is useful to understand the type of specialist who will conduct research in the field and the contribution that his research can make to furthering knowledge. The distinction we shall make is that between practitioner research and non-practitioner research.

a. The practitioner researcher

The practitioner in LT is the teacher himself, he who is in daily contact with the classroom and with related issues concerning decisions about planning, choice of materials, use of materials, etc. This figure is not normally considered in discussions concerning research. He is not normally required to have research skills and he is not normally considered to even want to do research.

This view is now gradually changing. There is the acceptance of the concept of lifelong learning and thus that practitioners will continue to

perfect their knowledge and skills as part of their on-going professional development and that research skills can help them do this. It can help them explore issues of direct concern to themselves and their classes/school providing the bases for principled decisions concerning actions to be taken. The kind of research they will therefore undertake and be interested in is practical in nature, focused on very concrete and local issues.

The research tradition called Action Research (Kemmis, McTaggart 1982; Elliott 1991; Nunan 1993) allows precisely for this type of focus. It developed within the field of the Social Sciences in the 1960s and subsequently attracted the attention of the educational field with the political agenda to empower and emancipate teacher practitioners.

The main characterizing feature of Action Research - which contributes to its attraction - is its manageability. By this, we mean that it is research that is carried out in the form of micro-spirals where the teacher will focus on a small issue, observe it, reflect on it, notice aspects and take action. If he wishes, he can begin a new spiral of observation on the new action, again observing, reflecting and noticing. In other words, he furthers his knowledge over time, in small manageable doses. To be pointed out, however, as another characterizing feature, is the fact that the practitioner is concerned with his **own** practice. His research is, therefore, conducted in action (while he is teaching) on action (e.g., on what he/his pupils are doing).

What contribution can such research - classroom-based action research - give to furthering knowledge in the field of LT? Given the limited scope of Action Research paths - they concern prof. X's problems/interests in school Y - one might be led to think that, as they are highly local and idiosyncratic and maybe even 'non-scientific' given that prof. X is not a professional researcher, they contribute very little.

In fact the capacity of research in the Action Research tradition to contribute to furthering knowledge in the LT field in general is negatively linked precisely to this limited range of influence - it can only directly refer to the specific context it was conducted in. In other words it is extremely useful for the teacher/group of teachers who conducted it but may be less directly so for the field in general. There are ways to overcome these drawbacks:

- specific training of language teachers to conduct this type of research which is necessary if the exactness which is associated with research be guaranteed (but here the term exactness or rigour has the connotations it enjoys within the qualitative research paradigm rather than the quantitative research paradigm);
- help and guidance in making the results public in the diverse forms that this may take, including publication proper. This last point is particularly important as it is through a detailed and clear descrip-

tion of the situation and of the issue explored that the typicality of the situation and the issue themselves can be highlighted. It is the concept of typicality which allows for others when reading the results to see whether the research can have any relation to their own situation. Typicality here substitutes what in quantitative research is called generalizability.

A database of quality action research results, only possible if these are published, would represent a rich source of data and reflection that can be consulted by others – either other practitioners or other types of researchers (that here we have called the non-practitioner researcher, cf. below) – in the quest for deeper understanding of issues that are directly linked to what goes on in the language class.

Thus, in the LT field, an important actor to keep in mind when contemplating training for research is the practitioner himself.

b. The non-practitioner researcher

The non-practitioner researcher on the other hand is normally someone different from the teacher exploring his own working situation. He is a specialist with a wide range of knowledge and skills in different research traditions that allow him to consider all the options available to make the best methodological choices and carry out in-depth analyses and reflection on the results.

It does not exclude that he adopt a methodology akin to that adopted in the Action Research tradition – especially if he is interested in classroom research – but of course the element of empowerment and emancipation underpinning it would not be on the agenda. His will be classroom-based research rather than classroom-based *action* research. Even though seemingly limited in scope (focus is on a classroom) the importance of classroom-based research (including classroom-based **action** research) lies in its capacity to inform beliefs at more abstract levels (see the arrows in figure 1), e.g., inform thought about new approaches, about the development of syllabus models, about features of methodology, about intercultural issues.

The non-practitioner researcher needs research skills that enable him to operate along the whole spectrum of the LT continuum (cf. Fig. 1) penetrating any of the single areas he is interested in to research it in the manner which is most consistent with his objectives, research questions and operating conditions. Thus, he will need skills to carry out quantitative and qualitative research and to be able to operate at a more abstract theoretical level. His focus can be classroom-based (e.g., observe foreign language interactions in the foreign language classroom; observe teacher positive feedback and their effect on the quality of student foreign language production; student response to consciousness raising activities; student behavior towards use of ICT in

the foreign language lessons, etc.) or non-classroom-based (e.g., study of teaching materials to identify hidden cultural stereotypes and biases; analysis of school language policies; study of teacher motivation...).

The non-practitioner researcher, typically a Ph.D student, *assegnista di ricerca*, university teacher³ needs to be competent therefore in:

- qualitative interpretative methodologies (ethnography, case studies, narratives, conversation analysis) being able to collect, analyze, and reflect on the thick data to identify or draw out emerging ideas, principles;
- quantitative methodologies being able to manage the challenge of quantitative research design, implementation and analysis of data through statistics, be they descriptive or inferential;
- above all, he needs to be competent in reflecting and in abstracting the results of his research to the greater picture, relating them theoretically to the more abstract levels of the LT framework. This requires maturity and a deep knowledge of the LT field in general and the specific domain in particular.

6 Prospects

From the above presentation of the LT discipline we have tried to indicate the need for researchers who have the skills for promoting knowledge and understanding at various levels of the field in general and we have briefly mentioned the nature of these skills. We have pointed out that such training is not always available. Thus, moves need to be taken to introduce research methodology specific to LT in those postgraduate courses where enrollment for further specialisation in LT takes place: *Laurea magistrale*, Masters, Ph.D programmes as well as other types of postgraduate courses like *Corsi di perfezionamento* and teacher training programmes. Thus, all specialist post-graduate courses for LT, be they for professional development (e.g., for teachers) or for academic or other high-profile careers, must offer suitable tailor-made packages. Although the education system does not expect or require research skills in teachers (but we consider it to be a useful means whereby professional development occurs), the education system, as well as society at large, **does** expect such skills in a qualified Ph.D student.

Creating such skills is problematical. The typical foreign language student, as a result of his choice of academic career (languages), is not likely

³ It is important to note that the distinction between practitioner and non-practitioner research should not lead one to think that teachers should be versed in action research alone. Teachers can be seconded to the local education authorities or to the Ministry where skills in research of the non-practitioner sort can be required.

to be versed in statistics, especially in inferential statistics, and experience tells us that it is this tradition in particular that provokes uncertainty and a tendency to go for the qualitative paradigm as this is seen to be less exacting. While confirming that the latter paradigm is well suited to many LT research issues, the fact remains that specialists, especially at the Ph.D level, must have competence in the former precisely because they are **qualified** as specialists. Attention therefore needs to be focused on this issue to change the underlying negative attitudes. Furthermore experience also shows that teaching the student how to plan for fitness of purpose (Cohen 2000), to choose suitable instruments, to collect the data, etc., is only half of the picture. The student has to learn how to read the data, to reflect on their meaning identifying their relationships with the issue(s) under investigation. Only in this way will empirical research contribute to knowledge and understanding in the LT field.

Bibliographic References

- Balboni, P.E. (2009). *Storia dell'educazione linguistica in Italia: Dalla legge Casati alla Riforma Gelmini*. Torino: UTET.
- Balboni, P.E. (2012). «Educazione linguistica: Coordinate epistemologiche ed etiche per una nuova rivista» [online]. *EL.LE: Educazione linguistica. Language Education*, 1, pp. 9-31.
- Brown, D. (1988). *Understanding Research in Second Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cohen, L.; Manion, L.; Morrison, K. (2000). *Research Methods In Education*. London; New York: Routledge Falmer.
- Council of Europe (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics: Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methodologies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Elliott, J. (1991). *Action Research for Educational Change*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based Language Learning and Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- European Commission (1995). *Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society* [White Paper]. Brussels.
- Hashemi, M.R. (2012). «Reflections on Mixing Methods in Applied Linguistics Research». *Applied Linguistics*, 33 (2).
- Kemmis, S.; McTaggart, R. (1982). *The Action Research Planner*. Geelong: Deakin University Press.
- Nunan, D. (1992). *Research Methods in Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Nunan, D. (1993). «Action Research in Language Education». In: Edge, J.; Richards, K. (eds.), *Teachers Develop Teachers Research: Papers of Classroom Research and Teacher Development*, Oxford: Heinemann.
- Richards, K. (2003). *Qualitative Enquiry in TESOL*. Hampshire (UK): Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Davis, K.A.; Lazaraton, A. (eds.) (1995). Qualitative Research in ESOL, *TESOL Quarterly*, 29 (3).
- Williams, J.; Doughty, C. (eds.) (1998). *Focus on Form in Classroom Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Widdowson, H.G. (2000). «On the Limitations of Applied Linguistics». *Applied Linguistics*, 21 (1), pp. 3-25.