

S11E10 - Florencia Henshaw - Guiding SLA Principles and Assessment

0:00:00-0:00:27 Florencia Henshaw

My goals are not to see if they remember this rule, if they remember the words. My goals are, can they communicate successfully at this level? In institutional education, everything is so structured. You start here this many times a week. You have to move forward. You have the midterm, you have the final everything. It's not organic enough. And language acquisition is very organic. And so I think the time is the biggest challenge we have.

0:00:28-0:00:42 Automated Voice

You're listening to *Speaking of Language*, a podcast recorded at the Language Resource Center at Cornell University. Each week we explore a topic related to language pedagogy and second language acquisition. This week on *Speaking of Language*,

0:00:43-0:00:52 Sam

Florencia Henshaw returns to discuss her book *Common Ground: Second Language Acquisition Theory Goes to the Classroom*.

0:00:53-0:01:00 Angelika

We're back from spring break. Welcome to a new episode of *Speaking of Language*. I'm Angelika Kramer, the director of the Language Resource Center at Cornell University.

0:01:01-0:01:15 Sam

And I'm Sam Lupowitz, the LRC's Media Manager. Today we have the pleasure of speaking once again with Florencia Henshaw, who recently gave a talk as part of our monthly LRC Speaker Series on SLA principles and assessment.

0:01:16-0:01:31 Angelika

Her talk was part of our spring learning community that is sponsored by the Central New York Humanities Corridor from an award by the Mellon Foundation. The learning community brings together colleagues from Cornell, Colgate, Skidmore, and Syracuse to exchange best practices in language teaching.

0:01:32-0:01:33 Sam

Welcome to *Speaking of Language*, Florencia.

0:01:34-0:01:37 Florencia

Thank you so much. Thank you for having me here again.

0:01:38-0:01:52 Sam

So we always like to start out our podcast talking about our guests' background and path with languages. I know this is your second time here, but quickly for our listeners, remind everyone what you're up to and where you come from.

0:01:53-0:02:37 Florencia

So I am originally from Buenos Aires, Argentina. So I am a native Spanish speaker. I moved to the US when I was 19, and I moved here because of love, and you know how it is. I was going to study biology—that was my major for a while. And then somebody told me that you could teach languages in the US, and I was like, okay, I love that, let's do it. And so I decided to become a Spanish teacher, and then somebody convinced me that I had what it takes to do a PhD. And so I went all the way with a Master's and a PhD, and I ended up teaching just college.

0:02:38-0:02:53 Angelika

Yeah, that's how it goes. Well, and we need to thank all those people who convinced you that language teaching is your chosen path because you have had tremendous impact on the language teaching community here in the US and internationally too.

0:02:54 Florencia

Thank you.

0:02:55-0:03:18 Angelika

So, Florencia, in this learning community that we are currently hosting with our colleagues from the Central New York Corridor, we are reading your recent co-authored book, *Common Ground Second Language Acquisition Theory Goes to the Classroom*. What are some of the fundamental aspects of SLA, particularly as they pertain to proficiency oriented instruction?

0:03:19-0:05:26 Florencia

So to simplify a lot, I think the three that I always go back to is first, the role of input, the undeniable need for input to understand how much we need it, and we don't need it just as exposure. In fact, input is not just exposure, so understanding what input is exactly, what we do with it, and then what role it plays. The second one that I go to is the role of output, and I know that perhaps people have different opinions on this matter, but I believe that most SLA researchers would probably agree that output does play an important role, and so we need to understand that too. Unfortunately, I think there's a lot of misconceptions when it comes to input and output out there. And sometimes we tend to think that input is just exposure and that output is just production, or it's just language practice. And so we need to understand a little bit better what those two are, but I think they both have a role and we need to make sure that we incorporate them properly. And then the last one to me is something that I think we all agree on, and yet, for some reason, there's a lot of confusion about it, which is that teaching rules is not a substitute for meaningful engagement with the language. And a lot of textbooks appear to assume that it is. But we all all all know that is not the case, and so I think that as language educators, if we understand a little bit better the difference between implicit and explicit knowledge, and if perhaps teaching rules fulfills any kind of an effective need for the students, just to note, to separate that from expecting it. I taught it, now you know it, go use it. So if we can at least understand how important it is to have lots of opportunities for meaningful engagement with the language, and that's really going to help to develop proficiency, nothing else.

0:05:27-0:05:29 Angelika

We need sound effects, Sam. We need to have applause.

0:05:30-0:05:47 Sam

We've done an applause sound effect before. *[applause sound effects]*

Make that a more regular part of our program. Florencia, you talked about goal setting and assessments based on Actful proficiency guidelines and can do statements. Can you review the most important takeaways for language educators in that regard?

0:05:48-0:08:35 Florencia

Sure. I would probably say that being familiar with ACTFL Proficiency guidelines more than the can do statements. If I may, please ACTFL, don't hate me, but I think the proficiency guidelines are really the key here, to have realistic expectations. They are not perfect by any means, but they help us a lot to understand how much learners can do and especially how slow they will move at a certain point. So from novice low to novice mid to novice high, they go incredibly fast and we all get super excited and want them to keep going at the same speed, but then we plateau at the intermediate level for awhile, which can be frustrating for teachers and students. But we need to keep coming back to realistic expectations. What is my goal and then how I'm going to be measuring how much I'm accomplishing that goal. And I think the biggest shift that I had to make myself in terms of the overarching goal when it comes to proficiency assessment was that I was assessing successful communication at their level and not correctly applying what I had taught. So whether it was correctly remembering the words we learned, correctly remembering the rules we learned, all of that goes out the window. Even though I gave them a lot of words, I gave them a lot of grammar, right? I gave them a lot of the tools they needed. But if they were still able to communicate successfully for their level and task and modality and all of that, then I was happy. Then I knew that I had met my goal. And if you look at the proficiency guidelines, they're not about counting errors, they're not about how many words they know. I think that we need to keep that in mind to look at language holistically and to look at to what extent can they do this successfully. And so I think for me, doing the OPI training was definitely eye opening to realize what I was expecting of my learners and then have to make changes, adjustments from there. And then the other important takeaway is that one student is not one level. We need to keep remembering that. It's tempting to do that because in an institutional setting, we set goals for the course and then it's like this course is this level, but one course is not one level and one student is not one level. And so it's going to be different how much they can read, how much they can listen, how much they can write, how much they can talk. And so we need to keep adjusting our goals based on the modality—written, oral—and then based on the mode of communication—interpersonal, interpretive, presentational.

0:08:36-0:09:14 Angelika

Yeah, well, and I think, as you just said, language learning is so individual too. Right. And I think that's where the can do statements, I find them particularly helpful for the students because this is a much easier way for them to see their own progress rather than—because I think sometimes the proficiency guidelines can be a little bit complicated for a student to really understand “What does it mean that I'm Novice, high, intermediate, low, whatever?”—But I think

the can do statements help articulate that for students because it's much more practical and they can see their own progress as they move up the proficiency ladder.

0:09:15-0:09:48 Florencia

That's true. I think that's a really good point and I like that you keep emphasizing the students. The reason why to me, from the teacher perspective, the proficiency guidelines were more useful is because sometimes I see the can do statements as a checklist. Instructors think like, "this is what I need to cover," so to be careful. They were never meant to be a checklist. They were never meant to be a curriculum. But I understand the way they're written. People tend to gravitate to using them as a checklist of things to cover, but they were not necessarily. They were meant to be used, as you described it.

0:09:49-0:10:03 Angelika

Yeah, well, and you just talked about the three modes of communication—interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational—so when we ask our students "What do you want to be able to do at the end of your language course", what do they say?

0:10:04-0:10:05 Florencia

Have a conversation.

0:10:06-0:10:14 Angelika

Exactly. So what can we do in the classroom as a language educator to best support our learners to get there?

0:10:15 Florencia

That is a good question.

0:10:16 Angelika

That's the Holy Grail.

0:10:17-0:12:28 Florencia

Exactly. That's going to be all 90 minutes. Okay. So, I think what we need to do is first and foremost, it may sound silly, but I do think that we need to explain to students the importance of comprehension because, yes, they want to have a conversation, but we're not going to get there by talking. Right? We're not going to get there by having a conversation. We need to help them understand how we build a linguistic system in the first place, so that then they can access it and have a conversation. And I think they need to have realistic expectations about how much of a conversation they're going to be able to have, but also to understand the importance of comprehension, how much you need to do, how much more you need to understand, and then out of that, you're producing a subset. Right? So I think that it's important to keep emphasizing in our classes the importance of the interpretive mode, to not forget it, because the other two modes involve output, so output ends up winning, so to speak. And so we need to keep emphasizing the importance of interpretive, and then make room, of course, for some presentational and definitely some interpersonal. But even interpersonal, I think that in the lower

levels, the beginning levels, it needs to be scaffolded quite a bit with some room, not, not scripted. You only need to read these things and say yes, no. Right? It has to be something where they do have some freedom and they're pushing themselves to retrieve from their own system. Yes, but then the students need to understand that it's going to be limited how much they can say, and that's okay. If they go a bit beyond, I think that's fantastic. Right? But we don't want anybody to feel like they have fallen short. Right? So I think if we adjust our expectations with the interpersonal mode, they will be more and more and more comfortable to keep taking risks and build on that skill. But I think that we cannot forget the importance of input and the interpretive mode for the other two modes. Sometimes we tend to go straight to the other two because they feel the most active, but interpretive is key.

0:12:29-0:12:39 Sam

Terrific. So then what role does or should research play as language educators build curricula, syllabi, classroom activities and assessments?

0:12:40-0:14:32 Florencia

Well, I think that research can tell us a lot. The way that I look at research is like collecting clues in context, and then I interpret them as best as I can based on my own knowledge and then also based on what I know about my own context. Right? And my own students. But the great Patsy Liebaum said, "Research is not here to tell us what or how to teach. We need to accept that. We need to embrace that all research can tell us is explanatory support"—her words, not mine. And I think that is beautiful. That is exactly what it is when we're trying to make sense of it, when we're trying to understand why something works better than something else. I think research can tell us a lot about the principles, so to speak, the fundamentals after that, yes. Application always requires adaptation. Right? So not everything that works so well in research is going to work the same way with your students. I think we all know it. So there's a little bit of an art to teaching that it's really hard to capture in empirical research at least. But the other role that I see of research besides understanding the fundamentals, it's just the confidence, the confidence that it gives you as a language educator to be informed. And I think research helps us a lot in terms of being informed educators to be understanding why we do what we do. We feel a lot more confident in the decisions that we're making, in explaining those to our students and in making changes. Right? And realizing, you know what, "I need to learn more about this and I need to improve this part." So that's basically the role that I see of research. I don't think research can give us all the answers all the time for everything, but it can help us understand why some things are working and why other things are not.

0:14:33-0:15:09 Angelika

Yeah, well, and it's interesting too, because you can probably support a hypothesis that you have about what effective language teaching looks like if you search long enough. Right? There's probably research out there. I mean, there is sometimes conflicting research. And so I also thought it was interesting because you talked about the difference between teaching language in higher education and teaching language in K-12, and how those educators in those different groupings might look to research in different ways to support what they do. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

0:15:10-0:17:11 Florencia

Well, it could be that this is just my impression. Obviously I don't have concrete data to support what I'm about to say. But what I would say is that I think that K-12 is looking a little bit more at putting all of the puzzles together, sometimes better, whereas higher ed gets a little bit too stuck on. Well, but how valid was the research? And this particular study said this. I think they got a little bit too caught up by each individual tree in the forest where I think that K-12 is trying to look at the whole forest. I don't know if that analogy works, but that's just my impression of it. I feel like sometimes higher ed hangs on to that one study that they heard one time who said this, it's a little bit harder to make changes in that sense. But I really admire, I think, K-12 teachers are trying to connect dots and put it all together. And I completely understand the frustration when there is conflicting research on people saying different things. What I do tell or want to remind everyone of that is that if you look hard enough, if you declutter, there's a lot more common ground than it looks. Especially if we go back to what our goals are. If we keep going back to my goals are not to see if they remember this rule, if they remember the words my goals are, can they communicate successfully at this level? I think there's a lot more consensus when it comes to how can we get there. And so we don't need to get so caught up in the conflicting messages or in the conflicting findings. Because at the end of the day, I think that some of the fundamentals are still there and everything still points to that same direction.

0:17:12-0:17:39 Angelika

Yeah. And you just said that we're looking for common ground. Right? The title of your book, and I do think this is articulated so well in your book, it's very approachable and it makes all those principles of what second language acquisition is all about. It makes those principles very clear in an accessible way and also gives great little tidbits and tips for how to translate that into actual classroom teaching.

0:17:40-0:17:42 Florencia

Thank you. I appreciate that.

0:17:43-0:17:50 Sam

I have a very broad question, but we're going to throw it at you. What are some of the challenges language teachers face?

0:17:51-0:19:24 Florencia

Oh, boy. A lot of them. But you know what I think is the biggest, biggest challenge of all? Time. Either because we don't have enough time to be creating things or changing things or implementing things, but also time because acquisition is so slow. And as I said during the talk, nobody wants to tell the students, you're going to end up with the same proficiency level as when we started this course. Right? And so I feel like we are almost inevitably rushing and we want to find shortcuts, right? And we want to get them to see progress as fast as possible. So I think time is the biggest challenge we have. And it kind of goes hand in hand with impatience. Right? There's impatience on the part of the students to be like, "how can I still not say anything?" There's only so much you can do. Right? Or even impatience on our part. Right? That it's like, "oh my God, we said this so many times, how could they still not remember it?"

And sometimes it's just because it just needs more time. It needs more time and sometimes we don't have it. Because Bill Dampen talked about this in the [NOT SURE] too. In institutional education, everything is so structured. You start here this many times a week. You have to move forward you have the midterm, you have the final everything. It's not organic enough. And language acquisition is very organic, and so I think the time is the biggest challenge we have.

0:19:25-0:19:43 Angelika

So I already praised your book, which I will continue to do. It provides a lot of great tools for evaluating common practices and activities in which classrooms what sort of questions should educators ask themselves as they revisit what they do on a daily basis?

0:19:44-0:24:00 Florencia

So the questions that I usually propose that they are in common ground, and they appear in just about every chapter because we wanted a key recycling and coming back to them. So two of them would be "what information is being conveyed?" And that is to highlight the importance of content and not so much language structures or textbook sections, right? So, "what information is being conveyed?" "What content am I conveying?" whether it is that I'm expressing it or that is being conveyed by somebody else and I'm understanding it. And then the second question that I think is very important for, especially for language teaching is "what will others do with that information?" And what I find is that a lot of teachers ask themselves the first question, but not everybody asks themselves the second question. And I think that "what will they do with this information?" sometimes ends up being answered in a very abstract way, as in, well, they will learn it, or "oh, well, they will be entertained by it." And I think that's fantastic out in the real world, the classroom is part of the real world, but it's a little bit of a different world. It doesn't work the same way because it's very artificial to just be with a group of people. That all we have in common is just when we're available, that's about it. And so it's very difficult as teachers to be proposing a topic or an activity or anything that everyone is going to inherently be motivated to do or interested in. It is really difficult. And so for me as an educator, if I want to make sure that the information was conveyed successfully, then I want to make sure that it has a concrete purpose that they're doing something with it. So that's why to me, that second question, it goes for either input or output doesn't matter, right? So what are others doing with it? So even if the students are writing something, I want their classmates to do something with it, right? So somebody's output is somebody else's input and they need to do something with it. And then the third question that I added recently is "can they do it without paying attention to meaning?" And the reason for that is because some things look like there's content and some things look like there's a purpose, but then at the end of the day, you can do it without even speaking the language. Like the activity that I showed, it was a glorified war search, right? You can do it without speaking the language, then, I'm sorry, that is not contributing a whole lot. And if you have limited time in class with your students going back to the challenge of time, that should not be your go to, right? That's just how you view it. Now, if you're doing it because your students enjoy doing it and you're not doing that activity for them to acquire anything. By all means, have fun, do that activity with them. But if you're expecting that activity to be contributing to their linguistic system, then you're going to be disappointed. That's all. And then the last one that I think it's important, and it goes back to the art of teaching, if you will, but also the goals and

realistic goals is “is it an achievable and enjoyable challenge?” So I want them to be challenged. Not too easy, too bored, not paying too much attention, but I want it to be achievable. I want them to feel like they can do it, not get frustrated, and then enjoyable—you know your students, right? My students, as I shared, they don't like the activities where they have to stand up and go around the room finding names. They dread it. So why am I going to do it? It might work really well for somebody else. I don't think there's anything wrong with suggesting it. But then, you know your own students, and then you need to figure out this is going to be an enjoyable activity versus not even among teachers. We have our own preferences. Right? So I have a soft spot for two way infographics and all of that, and I know colleagues who are like, I cannot stand them. Okay. You have to understand what's going to be enjoyable for most people in the classroom. So those would be the four questions I keep asking myself.

0:24:01-0:24:07 Sam

Great.Terrific. So, Florencia, where can our listeners find out more about you, your book, and the rest of your work?

0:24:08-0:24:35 Florencia

So I have a LinkTree. See, I don't even know what it's called anymore. Is it LinkTree page? What is it called? Yeah, so that's where I have all of the things, but just Google me and you'll find me. But I have a YouTube channel called Unpacking Language Pedagogy. And my book, and so, yeah, if you Google me, you'll find me. And, oh, I'm at the University of Illinois, by the way. My full time job.

0:24:36-0:24:39 Angelika

Minor detail. Awesome.

0:24:40 Sam

Fantastic.

0:24:41-0:25:01 Angelika

Fantastic. Well, Florencia, we could keep chatting forever and ever, as you said, at least 90 minutes, right? But in the interest of time here, before we sign off, we'd like to ask you to share a word in a language that you love, that you speak, that you are learning, that you want to learn, that makes you giggle. Fill us in on your word, please.

0:25:02-0:25:44 Florencia

So the last time you interviewed me, I chose Circumlocation, and it's still a good word, but I'm going to go with a different one this time, and this one's special, because today is the 29th when we're recording this. And in my country, Argentina, the 29th of every month, we have a tradition that it is that you eat? Gnocchi, you know, the Italian pasta. It's a good tradition. Yeah, no kidding. My word for the day is gnocchi because not only of the tradition, but one of my dogs is named Gnocchi. He's a corgi.

0:25:45 Sam

Oh, my God.

0:25:46-0:25:50 Florencia

Like a little put brown potato thing. So it's perfect for him. Yeah. So gnocchi is the word of the day.

0:25:51-0:25:52 Sam

How wonderful.

0:25:53-0:26:01 Angelika

I like that. Well, in honor of your tradition and your puparoo, I think I'll have gnocchi for dinner tonight.

0:26:02 Florencia

Perfect.

0:26:03 Sam

Sounds like a good plan. Well, thank you so much for Speaking of Language with us again.

0:26:08-0:26:10 Florencia

Thank you. Thank you. It's always fun to chat with you.

0:26:11-0:26:32 Angelika

Next week we will speak with Dr. Valerie Friedland, professor of linguistics at the University of Nevada, Reno. Did you hear that? I said Nevada. Whose new book, *Like, Literally, Dude: Arguing for the Good and Bad English*, will be on bookshelves near you soon.

0:26:33 Sam

Until then,

0:26:34 Angelika

Auf wiedersehen.

0:26:35-0:26:46 Automated Voice

The Language Resource Center is located on the ground floor of Stimson Hall on Cornell's main campus in Ithaca, New York. Check us out on the Web at LRC.cornell.edu,

0:26:47-0:26:48 Sam

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0:26:49-0:26:53 Angelika

Speaking of language is produced by Angelica Kramer and Sam Lupowitz.

0:26:54 Sam

Recorded by Sam Lupowitz.

0:26:55-0:26:58 Automated Voice

Original music by Sam Lupowitz, Dan Gable and Joe Gibson.

0:26:59-0:27:03 Angelika

Thanks also to the College of Arts and Sciences at Cornell University.

0:27:04-0:27:13 Sam

As a reminder, the ideas and opinions expressed on this podcast do not reflect those of the College of Arts and Sciences or any other official entity of Cornell University.

0:27:14 Automated Voice

We thank our listeners, and do stay tuned for our next episode.