Do Norris and Ortega (2000) Disappoint?

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Norris and Ortega (2000) investigated the effectiveness of L2 instruction by conducting a meta-analysis of a plethora of SLA studies focused on pedagogy. With regard to the main research question posed in their investigation (Is L2 instruction effective?) they admit to experiencing some difficulties in trying to offer a definitive answer. According to the authors, these difficulties could be due to several problems. First, many researchers in the studies sampled by Norris and Ortega reported results as significant or not significant without reporting explanations or descriptive statistics. Some studies did not include a control group, thus making it difficult to compare results. The second issue speaks to replication. According to Rosenthal (1979), in order to obtain trustworthy interpretations about a given variable (e.g., type of instructional treatment), the variable, not the study, needs to be replicated. Many researchers report only statistically significant test results. They do not always report insignificant results or the magnitude or importance of instructional effects. The reported data could then be misinterpreted by other researchers. Yet another problem is that researchers do not tend to report proficiency information with regard to the participants. In addition, as Doughty and Williams (1998) have pointed out, researchers utilize differing terminology for describing instructional treatments and outcome measures. A similar argument was made by VanPatten (2002).

In seeking to understand whether L2 instruction is indeed effective, further complications arise when examining Norris and Ortega's (2000) meta-analysis. In their review, only experimental and quasi-experimental studies were included, while several other types of studies were excluded. Even though Norris and Ortega state that "one focus of the synthesis was to summarize and evaluate the range of research practices applied within the domain" (p. 434), there could have been studies that lead to more definitive results if included. The conclusions offered by Norris and Ortega could also have been skewed by the exclusion of studies with insignificant results.

Despite these complexities, however, Norris and Ortega's (2000) comprehensive article contains some thought-provoking findings. It was interesting to read that the effectiveness of L2 instruction is durable. Also, it was interesting to see that studies showed no difference in the effectiveness between Focus on Form and Focus on FormS instruction. Furthermore, while explicit treatments were found to have a slight advantage over implicit treatments, it appears that a treatment combining both an explicit and an implicit focus may yield the best results.

The authors include several recommendations for improving research practice in the field of SLA. According to Norris and Ortega (2000), it is important to investigate the effectiveness of a particular instructional technique as well as the effects of moderator variables such as learner factors, learning style, linguistic factors, cognitive factors, and pedagogical factors. Hopefully, this recommendation will help researchers answer many questions in the near future.

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