

your report (Howatt, 1984), which focused uncritically on the teaching of various European languages (and little elsewhere in the world). Language and literacy teaching have lengthy, unexamined histories and vast geopolitical dimensions, of which TESOL occupies one important aspect (Magnan, 2007; Stern, 1983; Triebel, 2005). But it seems to me that, unless future analyses can demonstrate otherwise, the role of theory in TESOL is essentially similar to that reported to our task force for the fields of foreign language teaching or English education.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Suresh Canagarajah for suggesting that I write this piece and to Tony Silva and Paul Matsuda for organizing a symposium at Purdue University focused on issues of theory, research, and second language writing, where some of my ideas here came to the fore.

## THE AUTHOR

Alister Cumming is professor and head of the Modern Language Centre at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. His research and teaching focus on writing, assessment, literacy, policies, and research methods, particularly in reference to English and other second languages.

## *Does TESOL Share Theories With Other Disciplines?*

**DIANE LARSEN-FREEMAN**

*University of Michigan  
Ann Arbor, Michigan, United States*

Dear Dr. Diligence,

I have read your response to the TESOL Department's submission to the task force on Theory in Academic Fields. I hope that you don't think that I am presumptuous in writing, but I wanted to reply to your memorandum, offering some further thoughts about the role of theory in TESOL, as well as commenting on the statement that you ended your memorandum with—your view that the role of theory in TESOL, other foreign languages, and English language education is essentially similar.

Before I turn to these two matters, I would like to thank you for your thoughtful response. It is clear that you have carefully considered many

of the points that the TESOL Department made. I was pleased to see that you appreciate the complexity of issues in our field, the need for a wide range of theoretical perspectives, and the diversity of the settings in which TESOL is practiced.

I would, however, like to amplify the statement that the point of a good theory is to provide heuristics for teaching practices yielding “theoretically-informed techniques for solving problems.” While I certainly think that a theory can do this, and have said so with regard to theories underlying language teaching methods (Larsen-Freeman, 1990, 2000b), it seems to me that theory serves as a heuristic in other ways as well. Chomsky (1988) may be right that practice without conscious awareness is in advance of scientific knowledge; however, I think that a significant role of theory is to make the unconscious conscious. A theory helps us learn to look (Larsen-Freeman, 2000a). It allows us to see and name things that might otherwise have escaped our attention. Our intuitions may be quite sound, but conscious awareness of why we do what we do allows us to make a choice—to continue to do things the same way or to change the way we do them. A theory also stimulates new questions in teachers, as well as in researchers, who are also important members of the TESOL community.

Additionally, our theories help us make sense of our experience. I remember many years ago that I found a correlation between the frequency of occurrence of certain English grammatical morphemes and the attested order of their acquisition in adult ESL learners (Larsen-Freeman, 1976). Frankly, this was a disturbing finding at the time. Our field had just emerged from the dominance of behaviorism, yet the frequency finding could be seen to support a behaviorist perspective: The more frequently a stimulus is paired with a particular response, the more rapidly it is acquired. It was only on further reflection that I realized that a frequency effect could also be explained by cognitivism: The more opportunities that a learner has to figure out the rules, the more their acquisition is facilitated. Recently, frequency once again features prominently in theory in our field, but this time within emergentism/complexity theory (Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2006; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008), which ascribes to frequency the important function of pattern morphogenesis and language change (Larsen-Freeman 1997, 2003). My point is that a frequency finding by itself is vacuous in the absence of a theoretical commitment with which to interpret it.

Furthermore, because researching and teaching need not be solitary pursuits, theory plays an additional role. It provides teachers and researchers with professional allegiances so we can join in community with others, and it provides us with a common toolkit with which to examine our practice and to conduct our investigations. Finally, when our theo-

ries come into contact with those of others, we have an opportunity to broaden our understanding. Indeed, it is in interacting with others' "sense of plausibility" (Prabhu, 1990, p 19), especially those that are dissonant with our own, that our teaching and research practice potentially remains vital. In short, a theory offers us in TESOL a way to become clear about what we do; to affirm, inform, or challenge what we do; to connect with others; and to make sense of our experience.

Now, let me turn to the second matter and address the statement with which you have concluded your memorandum. I can understand from your perspective why you would infer that the role of theory in the fields of TESOL, foreign language teaching, and English education is essentially similar. With regard to the heuristic role of theory I have just discussed, I would concur. However, having said this, I quickly add that this does not mean that particular fields are well served by the same theories. From an outside perspective, there may be no apparent reason that theories in these three fields should be different, and yet I believe that there is every reason that they are—due to the unique circumstances, critical perspectives, and histories of each of these fields. Indeed, even within TESOL, there are theories that make competing and incommensurate claims. Of course, some theories will be broad and adaptable enough to transcend particular fields, but they are the exception rather than the norm.

Now, I am not sure why you have convened this task force—why you want to know the role of theory in the various disciplines at the university. If this is an academic exercise, I think it an interesting and worthwhile one. However, I would want to discourage the task force report leading to some sort of pronouncement about the value of a particular theory or even the nature or role of theory applied generally. Whereas in the sciences, an absolute set-of-laws theory may be desirable, in a field such as TESOL, where human consciousness and intentionality are central, top-down directives are likely to fail. Nor should our expectation be that a theoretically informed research agenda will eventually yield a definitive list of factors which might, if properly specified and isolated, comprehensively account for the behavior in which we are interested (Sealey & Carter, 2004). Instead, the role of theory in TESOL should be to increase our awareness and to encourage the quest for greater understanding, on the part of teachers and researchers, all the while acknowledging that we will have to be satisfied with findings that point to tendencies, dynamic patterns, and contingencies which need interpretation, rather than absolute proscriptions and prescriptions.

Sincerely yours,  
Diane Larsen-Freeman

## THE AUTHOR

Diane Larsen-Freeman is a professor of education, professor of linguistics, and research scientist at the English Language Institute, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She is also a distinguished senior faculty fellow at the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont, United States.

## *Practice Without Theory and Theory Without Practice*

### ROBERT KAPLAN

*University of Southern California (Emeritus)*  
*Los Angeles, California, United States*

*Dr. Drew Diligence, Vice-President and Provost (hereafter P):* TESOL as a field of study seems to lie at the disjuncture between three war zones of theory—linguistic theory, applied linguistics theory, and educational theory. The problem is disjunctive enough to require a thorough investigation and a number of experts from each of the three disciplines to be deposed. The following deposition—representing only one vision—constitutes one of a potential series of statements intended to clarify the situation and to propose a solution.

Please state your name and your academic qualifications.

*Subject (hereafter S):* My name is Isaac Bullington, and I am emeritus professor of applied linguistics. I have worked in the field for 40 years and have taught applied linguistics courses in the Department of Linguistics and language teacher preparation courses in the Department of Education. I have published widely in the field and have been recognized by (among other distinctions) awards from AAAL and TESOL.

- P:* Clearly, you are qualified to offer information in this matter, and we stipulate that your comments shall be accepted. Please state your general view of the respective roles of theory and practice in the field.
- S:* It is important to look at this matter from a historical point of view first. As Docherry has remarked (in the early 1990s), there has been a gradual shift over the past 40 years away from what might be thought of as *scientific knowledge* toward some sort of *narrative knowledge*—a rejection of notions of Marxism, liberalism, democracy, and the changes attributed to the industrial revolution—in short, a movement in the direction of the relative and the local. This was a movement across structuralism (in the sense of a correction and modernization of the ideas of the Enlightenment), rejecting the subjective in existentialism and psychoanalysis in favor of a quest for the objective in the patterning of social life (see, e.g., the work of Saussure &