An Interview with Professor Diane Larsen-Freeman

Interview by: *Karim Sadeghi*

Background

Diane Larsen-Freeman received her PhD in linguistics from the University of Michigan. Following appointments at UCLA and the Graduate SIT Institute, she returned to the University of Michigan in January 2002 to direct the English Language Institute for six years. She is currently a research scientist emerita at the English Language Institute, as well as a professor of education emerita, a professor of linguistics emerita, and a faculty associate of the Center for the Study of Complex Systems at Michigan. Larsen-Freeman has made presentations in sixty-five countries around the world and is the author of eight books. She was the editor of the journal Language Learning for five years. In addition to her Lifetime Achievement Award in 2000 (Heilne & Heilne), she has received many other awards including Fulbright Distinguished Chair in 2010 and has been named as one of 30 American pioneers in the field of ESL in the 20th century by ESL Magazine (January/February 1999).

What comes below is an email-based interview with Prof. Larsen-Freeman on her current and future research agendas, conducted by the editor-in-chief of IJLTR. In the interview, KS stands for Karim Sadeghi and DLF stands for Diane Larsen Freeman.

KS: Thank you very much Prof. Larsen-Freeman for so humbly agreeing to take part in this interview despite your very busy schedule. I am sure almost all our readers have read a book or an article written by you, and all are more or less familiar with you and your works. I still vividly remember my first introduction to ELT (as a TEFL student) with your reader-friendly Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching. However, I would request you to briefly introduce yourself highlighting your professional and academic life and major achievements in your 50-year-long career.

DLF: Thank you, Dr. Sadeghi. To introduce myself, I should tell you and your readers that I have always been interested in <u>learning</u>.   In my years as a university undergraduate, I majored in psychology so I could study theories of learning. I also always wanted to be a teacher for as long as I can remember. As a young woman, I joined the U.S. Peace Corps, and I was given the opportunity to teach English in Malaysia for two years. That experience completed the picture, and I realized that language learning and language teaching were what I cared about most.

A short while after I returned from Malaysia, I began graduate study at the University of Michigan, where I subsequently earned an M.A. and a Ph.D. in linguistics, with a specialization in second language acquisition. My first professorial appointment was at UCLA, where I had the opportunity to teach a graduate course in English grammar for teachers. Professor Marianne Celce-Murcia taught another section of the same course, and we decided to work together on a book project, which became *The Grammar Book: An ESL/EFL Teacher's Course*. I was also inspired by my UCLA colleague, Professor Evelyn Hatch, and her work on discourse analysis. As a result, I edited a book entitled *Discourse Analysis and Second Language Research*.

I loved being at UCLA, but for personal reasons, my husband and I decided to move to Vermont, where we raised our two sons, and where I took up a position at the SIT Graduate Institute. SIT is well-known for its approach to educating internationalists, among them language teachers. I learned a great deal from my colleagues and students about teaching, and it was there that I wrote the book you referred to (*Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*), based on the methods course as it was taught at SIT. As I think readers of the book know, contrary to talk about our being in a "post-method" era, I believe a knowledge of methods is extremely important for teachers, who can use the principles of the methods to create their own approach and who can experiment with the techniques of the methods, to the extent that they want to and that it is possible to do so. Creating one's own teaching approach and experimenting with techniques are ways to keep one's teaching practice alive and to keep one from getting "burned-out."

I stayed at SIT happily for a number of years. Then, in 2002, my alma mater, the University of Michigan, invited me to accept an appointment as a professor and director of the famed English Language Institute. The temptation was great, and we returned to Ann Arbor. I spent the rest of my career at Michigan, and when I retired, I took up a position as a Senior Visiting Fellow, teaching graduate students in the Educational Linguistics Division at the University of Pennsylvania. The truth is, even at my age, I love to teach, and I have been given the opportunity to continue to do so. How lucky am I!

One other highlight about my career is that I have been able to travel to many countries (around seventy) over the years, mostly to speak at national conferences. When I do, I always learn. So, you see, even now, almost 50 years later, I am still learning and teaching!

KS: Could you talk about your books and scholarly articles? Please tell us how many publications you have and what the major focuses of these publications have been. How do you compare your first and last publications in terms of focus and topics covered?

DLF: Well, I have mentioned some of my books. Three others include *An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research* (which I wrote with Mike Long, my student from UCLA), *Teaching*

Language: From Grammar to Grammaring, and *Complex Systems and Applied Linguistics* (co-authored with my British colleague, Lynne Cameron). I also directed a 4-volume grammar book series for students: *Grammar Dimensions: Form, Meaning, and Use.* You asked how many publications I have. I have just looked at my CV, and I have counted over 120 book chapters and journal articles, and I have 8 more underway.

To compare my first publication to my last one was an interesting exercise. Thank you for asking me to do it. My first publication was a written version of a paper I gave at the first TESOL conference that I attended, in 1974. I was a graduate student at Michigan then, and the paper was entitled: "A re-examination of grammatical structure sequencing." My most recent publication is forthcoming in a book edited by Zhao Hong Han and Lourdes Ortega, celebrating my work with Complexity Theory. My chapter title is "Complexity Theory: The Lessons Continue." In the first article, I focused narrowly on an instructional issue, namely in what order grammar structures should be taught; in the last, I looked very broadly at how we can benefit from a more holistic perspective on language and its learning.

KS: You have spent most of your academic life researching grammar. Is there any reason why you have stuck to the same topic throughout your academic life? Do you think there is still room to do further research in this area? If yes, what other unexplored areas would you hope to attend to in your future research on grammar?

DLF: I actually think that I have dealt with a lot of areas in my career. One of the things that I like about being an applied linguist is that it has allowed me to delve into learning, teaching, and language. However, you probably are correct in that I have spent a great deal of time researching grammar. There are several reasons for this. One is what I call "the inert knowledge" problem. The term is actually Alfred North Whitehead's, which he wrote about in 1929, but it is a timeless problem, especially applicable to learning grammar. It is the idea that our students can recite all the grammar rules and do all the grammar exercises, but cannot really use what they have learned for their own purposes. That problem has intrigued me for a long time. It is one of the reasons that I coined the term "grammaring." I reasoned that if we were to teach grammar more dynamically, more as a process than a product, we could help ameliorate the problem.

I also felt that grammar was misunderstood. Many think of grammar as unchanging rules about structures. Consequently, sometimes students (and teachers, too!) find it boring. However, I think grammar is much more than static rules—it is a system for making meaning in pragmatically-appropriate ways. The rules are not arbitrary. There are reasons for them. And, if you know the reasons, then you will be empowered. You will truly see that there is a "grammar of choice," which does not privilege a single means of expression. Also, when you think of grammar as a meaning-making system, you can find engaging ways to teach it to your students.

KS: Which one of your works you have enjoyed the most? Which one of your books/articles you think is more seminal compared to others? Which one has been welcomed the most by the readers? Which area of your work would you like to spend more time on and why?

DLF: Each book that I have written has been challenging, but in different ways. For instance, the challenge in writing the *Techniques and Principles* book was how to take profound ideas and make them accessible to my readers. The challenge in writing *The Grammar Book* (now almost 1,000 pages in its 2015 edition) was sheer stamina. The challenge in writing the *Complex Systems* book was how to do justice to a theory originating in the natural sciences, but one that I was convinced had important implications for how we thought about language and its learning. This last one still intrigues me, and, in fact, I am writing another book on Complex Dynamic Systems Theory and language, with an Austrian colleague, Philip Herdina, whom I met when I held a Fulbright Distinguished Chair at the University of Innsbruck in 2010.

KS: One of your recent major contributions to the field of TESOL has been the introduction of Complex Dynamic Systems Theory. Could you talk about the main elements of the theory and how it can be applied to future research and practice on various aspects of (second) language acquisition?

DLF: CDST attempts to account for complex, dynamic, nonlinear processes, and I can think of few things that are more complex, dynamic and nonlinear than language. It is important to note, however, that "complex" does not mean "complicated" in the theory. "Complex" refers to the fact that something new emerges out of the interaction of the parts of a system—something at a different level of complexity, the way that a bird flock emerges from the interaction of individual birds. I think this is true of language. As we humans interact in a language, patterns, sometimes novel ones, emerge. The emergent patterns become the language system—a dynamic system, which is always changing.

I think that the theory has a lot to tell us as teachers and researchers. For one thing, it is an ecological theory: it says that the context of teaching and research is really important. It tells us that a computer metaphor, with terms like "input" and "output" really doesn't do justice to either language or to our students. It makes our students seem like computers, rather than the living, breathing, thinking humans that they are. It also shows how individual learners can follow vastly different learning trajectories. And, in charting their learning paths, we have evidence that learning is nonlinear—sometimes a learner's performance even regresses from a target language perspective—and that is natural, usually temporary and should not be alarming.

KS: What are your future research and publication plans? On a video clip broadcast in a TELLSI Conference at Kurdistan University in May 2016, you highlighted the role of teacher educators and teacher education in delivering effective EFL/ESL instruction. Does this emphasis show a shift in your interest area and imply that teachers should come first in the teaching/learning process?

The TELLSI organizer asked me to prepare a video clip on one of the themes of the conference, and I chose teacher education. I think teachers are extremely important. All the research I know suggests that teachers have tremendous influence on learning outcomes. While I have written that "teaching doesn't cause learning," I think that skillful teachers can create learning opportunities for their students. I am a teacher educator, and I am always searching for better ways to help my students improve their practice. I try to teach them as I would hope and expect them to teach their own students.

These days, I have also been happily studying the fractal nature of language. A fractal is a geometric figure that is self-similar at different levels of scale. Since it is a figure that is associated with CDST, the thought occurred to me that language must be a fractal. I think I have found evidence for this, and I am excited by the discovery.

KS: Given that most of our readers are applied linguists and junior researchers in the field, what do you think issues of current interest are in the field and what should prospective researchers be more attending to in their studies?

DLF: There has been an expansion of both epistemology and ontology in the field. In an article, published in *The Modern Language Journal* earlier this year (The Douglas Fir Group, 2016), we point to the impact of globalization, mobilization, and technology on second language acquisition. I think this is a time of great questing. I expect that this is healthy, but it requires a great deal of scholars, especially scholars-in-training. I would say to them, read broadly, do not rush to make a commitment to a particular theory, remain open. I believe that we are entering a period where what will be most valued is a transdisciplinary perspective. The problems in the world are too great to be tackled without an understanding of the systems of which they are a part.

KS: What is your suggestion to bridge the current gap between theory and practice in the field of applied linguistics -- as most classroom teachers believe that research output (especially those published in top tier journals such as SSLA) is good for researchers only and that these publications have very limited classroom applications?

DLF: As I have written in one of my recent publications ("Research into practice: Grammar learning and teaching" in *Language Teaching*, 2015), seeing research findings as applicable to teaching might <u>not</u> be a helpful way to think of them. First of all, not all researchers expect their findings to be immediately applicable. It seems to me that one of the most important contributions researchers can make is to encourage teachers to think about their teaching, affirming some practices and challenging others. Of course, in order for it to be useful, I think researchers should conduct more ecological research, which takes into account the complex reality of the classroom. I also believe the findings would be more useful if research agendas were informed by teachers' questions and if research articles were written in a straightforward and respectful manner, which helps teachers see the relevance of their studies.

KS: If you were given a second chance to live the life you have lived, would you choose to be an applied linguist again or would you prefer to take a different path? Why? Is there anything you wish you could have accomplished in your life/career that you haven't so far?

DLF: I love being an applied linguist! It has allowed me to indulge my varied interests and continue to learn. The only thing I would wish for is more time. I have so many other ideas and projects that I would love to explore and to share. Meanwhile, it is appropriate for younger scholars to carve out their own careers and to make their own contributions to applied linguistics.

KS: Many thanks again dear Prof. Larsen-Freeman for so humbly taking part in this interview. It is a great pleasure for me and the IJLTR readers to get to know more about the AAAL's recipient of the Distinguished Scholarship and Service Award in 2011. Is there anything else that you would like to add or share with our audience?

DLF: Thank you for your thoughtful questions, Dr. Sadeghi. I wish your readers an opportunity to do what I have been privileged to do—to let my curiosity and my sense of service be my guides.