

Foreign language teaching at the heart of several disciplines

Leila Najeh

Faculty of Arts and Humanities University of Sfax, Tunisia

Abstract

For sociolinguists, language is one of the most important forms of human contact, it is well defined as is a social phenomenon, and it is subject to changes and development only in the environment of its users. However; for psycholinguistics language is instantiated in the mind, therefore; language can be regarded as a mental phenomenon, that is why psychological and mental problems like (language anxiety, disorder, delayed language development) implicated language in psychology.

Therefore, whenever foreign language teaching, is broadly discussed, different areas of knowledge intersect. Scholars realize that linguistics is not the only area in which a language teacher should be trained. The importance of psychology and sociology as well as more training in pedagogy is being recognized. A significant contribution to the literature is works that document the of different areas of research, mainly linguistics, sociology, sociolinguistics, psychology, and psycholinguistics on FLL researches(Gardner, 1985; Gass & Schachter,1989; Lopéz,1990; Hakuta, 1994; Davis,1995 Bialystok, Williams & Burden,2010). This paper considers some ways in which different disciplines, mainly sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, pedagogy, didactics, educational psychology can interface in FLT/FLL researchers, to get a holistic view of FLT/FFT and to afford an 'ideal' teaching method that covers all sides of language.

Keywords: foreign language teaching, multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary.

1. To begin with:

1.1. Misconceptions of the multidisciplinary approach

In this paper, an endeavor is made to unveil if a multidisciplinary approach is correctly perceived, especially, by beginners researchers. Many misconceptions were noted.

Thirty researchers (15 are beginners and 15 are qualified researchers) from different disciplines were interviewed to get the data. They were, first, asked to define a multidisciplinary approach, and then which is better multidisciplinary or disciplinary.

All qualified researchers showed a correct understanding of the approach. The following answers were provided:

- We cannot say such research is better because it is multidisciplinary or disciplinary.....the quality of research depends on the way it is talked not on the nature of research...
- Choosing a multidisciplinary or a disciplinary approach depends on your research problems and objectives.
- a multidisciplinary approach is an approach that uses different data from different disciplines

By contrast, most beginners 10 out of 15 did not have a correct understanding of what is a multidisciplinary approach. Five common misconceptions were noted.

- The first misconception is that beginners understand the multidisciplinary approach as the use of several viewpoints within one research to criticize one approach. The
- a multidisciplinary approach is a comparative study in which different views are compared.....
- The multidisciplinary approach is a kind of critical study in which one claim is criticized using other fields of knowledge.
- a multidisciplinary approach is a process towards getting a perfect approach
- a multidisciplinary approach is a research conducted by a group of researchers

The three first responses above consider the multidisciplinary approach is approach as a conflict between opposite disciplines. Therefore, viewing the multidisciplinary approach is approach as being the comparative and critical studies criticizing findings until finding the perfect approach put an end to creativity and scientific progress. Because, on the contrary, the multidisciplinary approach is and should be viewed as one approach that fills the bridge between different disciplines and encourage cooperation between researches

The last response shows that the respondent uses the term interchangeably with the interdisciplinary approach.

Indeed, researchers' misconceptions about multidisciplinary maybe because the concept is not crystallized for it is somewhat new, also the emergence of similar terms of inter and transdisciplinary sharpened the ambiguity because the three terms are rather defectively differentiated in the dictionaries. Furthermore, the notions are misperceived by the students because it is much used in biology and physics than in human sciences.

1.2. What is meant by multidisciplinary?

whenever the term multidisciplinary is treated, one may find himself in front of a complicated ‘triplex’- multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary- slightly different with a bit difference.

Historically speaking, it is not easy to know when the terms were emerged exactly because it is difficult, too, to determine when the classification of different disciplines happened and by whom. (Klein 1990) asserted:

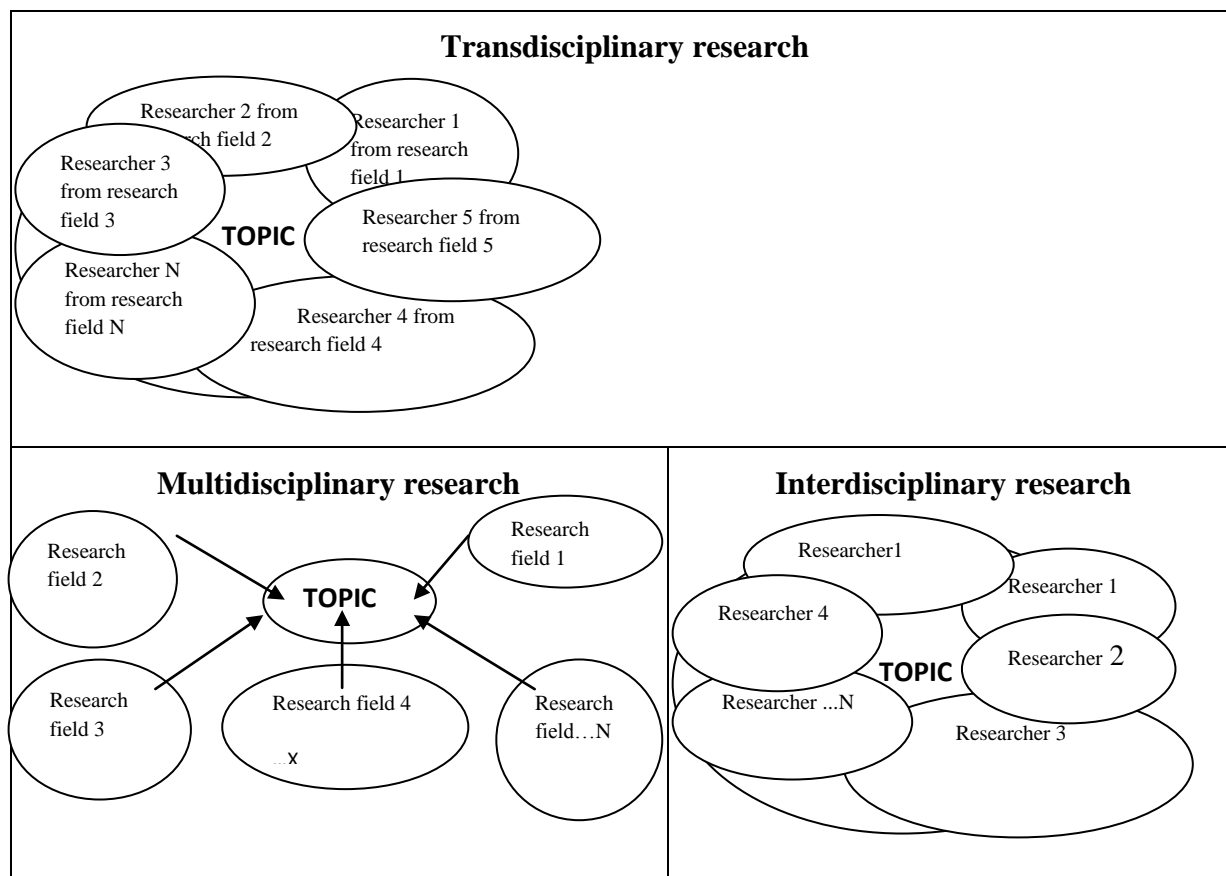
For some it is quite old, rooted in the ideas of Plato, Aristotle, Rabelais, Kant, Hegel, and other historical figures who have been described as “interdisciplinary thinkers”. For others it is entirely a phenomenon of the twentieth century rooted in modern educational reforms, applied research, and movement across disciplinary boundaries(...)The actual term did not emerge until the twentieth century (.....). However, the basic ideas are quite old (p.50)

Apart from the fact that the term is old in ‘meaning’ and relatively novel in ‘form’, multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary, though they, originally, referred to unlike approaches, are used as interchangeable for two reasons. First, because they are ambiguously defined though the prefixes ‘inter, multi’, and ‘trans’ do not have the same semantic effect. While the prefix ‘inter’ means ‘between, among, mutually’, the prefix multi- means ‘many’ trans means across; over; beyond; on the far side of; through (The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary. Volumes 1 and 2)

Indeed, ambiguity and interchangeability reside in the fact that in their indirect meaning both ‘between among and across entails divergence and variety. Second, in the realm, because the three types of approaches- multidisciplinary interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary – are cataloged under one rubric called integrative studies, Lombardo (2010) claimed « Futures education can be taught as a course in integrative studies, or reciprocally, integrative studies can be taught within the context of the future. This approach to futures education is both multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary”(p.14).

Accordingly, the three types are holistic approaches that employ different fields of knowledge to questioning one issue from different perspectives, and their value resides in the fact that various and sometimes opposite views complement each other to besiege one topic from different sides. Nonetheless, the most obvious difference between the three types of research is while interdisciplinary research is conducted by an individual researcher or among and between the team of collaborators from the same academic discipline in a given research situation, and exploit findings, data, techniques, tools, and theories from several disciplines to shed light on the one particular research question(Klein, 1990), in a multidisciplinary research a multidisciplinary team from several academic disciplines cooperate to solve many problems, in Choi’s words “Multi-disciplinarity draws on knowledge from different

disciplines but stays within their boundaries. Inter-disciplinarity analyzes, synthesizes, and harmonizes links between disciplines into a coordinated and coherent whole” (Choi, 2006), however; **transdisciplinary research** is conducted by researchers from different disciplines working jointly and move beyond discipline-specific approaches to address a common challenge (Nicolescu, 2005). The following figures are meant to show the difference between multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and interdisciplinary approaches.



2. Foreign language teaching researches at the forefront of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary researches

Scholars agree that a multidisciplinary approach could be suitable for dealing with complex issues. Therefore, working on foreign language learning/teaching is an intricate engagement for language has several levels, and it is multifaceted, requiring proficiency in several areas of knowledge that make up language only when considered, equally, together. In this context, Lopéz (1990) asserted that “nowadays, we know that linguistics is not the only area in which a language teacher should be trained. The importance of psychology and sociology, as well as more training in pedagogy, is being recognized”(p.10).

According, most researches into foreign language learning has mirrored Lopez’s view, A significant contribution to the literature is studies that document the influence of different areas of research, mainly linguistics, sociology, sociolinguistics, psychology, and

psycholinguistics on foreign language learning researches. Sliger, Seliger, Elana, and Shohamy (2001) asserted:

It is evident to any one reading research in second language acquisition, that the field is inter-disciplinary. The study of second language acquisition can be linguistic, psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, sociological, psychological and educational (p.1)

Furthermore, even if we browse through foreign language learning/teaching literature is easy to note the widespread use of terms borrowed from linguistics, psychology, and sociology as axial concepts in the abundant glossaries of foreign language learning/teaching literature

Two resulting questions are: (i) what is the value of these disciplines both for the teacher and the learner who is at the heart of the learning process? and (ii) what are the implications of these areas in developing teaching methods.

The interconnectedness between ‘sociology and sociolinguistics’ which among their scopes is language as a social phenomenon (Davis, 1995, p.430). According to Sapir (1949), language has a great force on socialization. He asserted that “the value of linguistics for sociology in the narrower sense of the word is just as real as for the anthropological theorist. Sociologists are necessarily interested in the techniques of communication between human beings” (p.70), and polyglotism as the general theme of FL researches, is the first explanation of why some FL researchers borrow so much from sociology and sociolinguistics.

Indeed, the interaction between FLT and sociology as well as sociolinguistics dates back to the reform movement that is well known as a criticism of the translation method which was no efficient in training the students to use the target language communicatively and fluently (Collard, 1904; Sweet, 1964; Paul and al 2010).

At that time experts in FLT called for a radical reform that is now known as the reform movement which promoted language, society, learning, and teaching as four central concepts and essential building blocks of any theory of language teaching (Stern, 1992, p.23).

The involvement of some psychologists, like Lozano and Asher, in FLT may be similarly explained. Scholars from non-linguistic fields become involved in FLT on the basis that language is a psychological phenomenon. According to Sapir (1993, pp.10-11) the psychologists, as well as linguists, have been concerning themselves more and more with linguistic data. So far it is doubtful if they have been able to contribute very much to the understanding of language behavior beyond what the linguists have themselves been able to formulate based on their data.

Additionally, the value of psychology in FLT resides in the fact that it answers some inquiries beyond the linguists’ remit. It is the concern of psychologues to explain some phenomena such as the relationship between learners’ psychological variables (personality traits, perceptions, beliefs, etc.) (Ganschow et al, 1998; Tanveer, 2007) and language learning and speaking process (Ellis, 1994; Patten, 1994) to explain some phenomena like the structures and processes, which underlie the learner’s ability to speak a second language and resolve some psychological problems like language anxiety (Andrade & Williams, 2009).

The value of pedagogy as a field of knowledge in the realm of FLT is obvious through the fact that language mastery is not enough for teaching. Bloomfield (1993) stipulated that a teacher should acquire a convincing pedagogy to transmit the information successfully to the

learners. He added that “next in uselessness to a teacher who does not know the language is the teacher who, to be sure, does know it – he may be a native speaker of it but has not the linguistic and pedagogic knowledge of how to impart it” (p.3).

So far, FLT is like a factory in which different disciplines actively operate homogeneously, to the extent that the frontier between these areas of knowledge: linguistics, psycholinguistics, and sociolinguistics, is not marked. Davis (1995, p.428) noted that SLA researchers have generally utilized the research techniques dominating psychological researches that are characterized by the philosophical perspectives of mentalism, behaviorism, and individualism. In contrast, another research paradigm, the ethnography of communication, which was developing during the 1970s within the field of applied linguistics, focused on the social meaning of language within the context of particular groups and cultures.

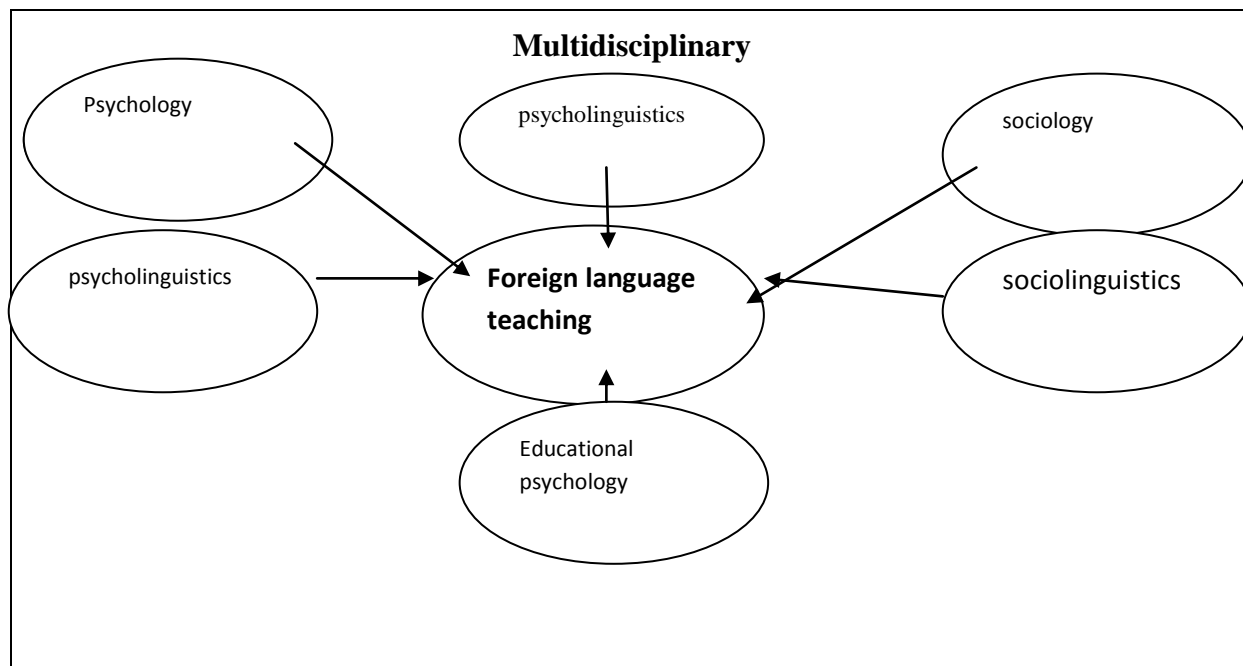
Bloomfield raised two problems for researchers classifying teaching methods.

First, an eclectic mixture between those disciplines (psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, linguistics, and so on) is sometimes present in one language learning theory. For example, behaviorism, which is the fully-fledged linguistic school upon which most teaching methods rely, grew out of two different seeds.

Its origin is structuralism as the oldest linguistic doctrine (Gass & Selinker, 2008, p.92) and psychology as an academic and applied discipline involving the scientific study of mental functions and behaviors. According to Mukalel (2007, p.40), the onset of behaviorism is psychology and subsequently structuralism in linguistics

Second, often the same discipline gives birth to more than one language teaching theory. Psycholinguistics, for instance, engenders behaviorism and mentalism which are typically two opposite theories. Mukalel (2007) wrote “all contemporary psychological approach to language boils down to two fundamental sets of theories. Behaviorist theories of language and cognitive theories of language. Both schools have variations in themselves, but the fundamental assumptions of the sub-theories are the same” (p.30).

Following Gass and Selinker’s (2008) assumption that linguistics has impacted research in second language acquisition since the early days of SLA research, with virtually every theory of linguistics having had some relevance to SLA research (p.159), the following section is going to study FLT methods concerning behaviorism and mentalism orthodoxies by shedding the light on the main tenets and implications of each school in the realm of FLT.



2.1. Foreign language teaching theories: An instance of the multidisciplinary nature of foreign language teaching researches

The influence of psychology in the realm of foreign language teaching is marked through two dominating schools: behaviorism and mentalism, each has established its general theory of language and then shifted to the theory of language learning and going further the two mainstreams are intermingled to give birth to many teaching methods, Quivy and Tardieu (2002) asserted “the oral-audio method is the fruit of a marriage between a linguistic doctrine, the structuralism and a psychological doctrine, behaviorism” (p.164).

Epistemologically speaking, as a general theory of language, behaviorism grew out of Pavlov’s psychological experiments known as classical conditioning or stimulus-response theory or behavior theory. Language is conceived as a behavior that is acquired in the course of a process of habit formation (Moulton, 1984, p.173).

In the linguistic realm, behaviorism was developed throughout the 1950s and 1960s; it relies objectively on observable measurable behavior and discounts mental activities in explaining language as another human property. For Littlewood (2006, p.5) language is not a mental process, it is a behavior, it is like other forms of human behavior language, it is acquired by a process of habit formation, its main components are: first, the child imitates the sounds and patterns which he hears around him; second, people recognize the child’s attempts as being similar to the adults and reinforce (reward) the sounds by approval or some desirable reaction; third, to obtain more of these rewards, the child represents the sounds and the patterns, so that these become habits, and finally in this way the child’s verbal behavior is conditioned or shaped until the habits coincide with the adult models.

These findings were shifted to language learning researches, many scholars admitted behaviorist view that language learning is a habit formation process (Alkhuli, 1976, p.11;

Freeman, 2000, p.26-28; Moulton, 1984; Stevick, 1982, p.15; Stern, 1992, p.73; Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p.9; Zimmerman, 2003, p. 8).

Such orthodoxy is well sounded in teaching methods built on behaviorism. Imitating and behaving like a native speaker of the target language and integrating into society enhance and facilitate the learning process. And then most teaching methods that have a behaviorism foundation start from three behaviourist premises:

- Language is speech rather than writing.
- Speech is preconditioning for writing due to two facts: (a) children with cognitive impairment learn to speak without learning to write and (b) many societies have no written language although all societies have oral language (Shankweiler & Liberman, 1972, p.293; Susan & Selinker, 2008, p.50).

In parallel, the mentalist school impacted FLT. Those who build their learning theory on the mentalism assumption that any foreign language is acquired in the same way the first language is acquired, that it is genetically determined, and learners are equipped with the power of observation and cognition enabling them to invent for themselves (Brown & Marks, 1994, p.164). Such assumptions explain why the role of the teacher, as an environmental element is not considered so significant in the learning process, his task becoming to promote communication. While the teacher facilitates communication in the classroom and one of his major responsibilities is to establish situations likely to promote communication (Freeman, 2000, p.128), the learner's autonomy is placed at the heart of the learning process. Campbell and Kryszeska (1992) agreed that "it is the learners themselves who become the major teaching resource; there is a sense in which the teacher becomes a learner and learners are transferred into teachers." (p.3)

The silent way which has mentalism underpinnings, dismissed the environmental factors absolutely, in favor of the learner's cognitive effort Gattegno (2010,p.28)

Another mentalism aspect of the silent method is that it aims at making the student able to use the language for self-expression, to express their thoughts, perceptions, and feelings. To do this, they need to develop independence from the teacher, to develop their inner criteria for correctness. Students become independent by relying on themselves. The teacher, therefore, should give them only what they need to promote their learning (Freeman, 2000, p.64). Accordingly, the silent method is summarized in the following maxim: minimize the teacher's talking time (TTT) to maximize student talking time (STT) (Lewis, 1993, p.10; Wajanury, 2006, p.43).

2.2.Eclectic teaching method: A second proof of the multidisciplinary approach is the nature of foreign language teaching researches

The survey of language teaching is characterized by the incessant search for more effective ways of teaching language. Therefore, FLT researchers continually explored new options for addressing these and other basic issues and the effectiveness of different instructional strategies and methods in the classroom. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), language teaching came into its own as a profession in the twentieth century. The whole foundation of contemporary language teaching was developed during the early part of the twentieth century. Since then, some teaching methods and approaches have been developed.

Though most teaching methods have either mentalist or behaviourist underpinnings which implies their multidisciplinary nature, an eclectic method is developed in the matrix of both mentalism, behaviorism, and, sociolinguistics Cerzaser, noted “there is not broadly speaking, a marked line between different methods but often an eclectic mixture between methods is present (p.112).

According to Rivers, an eclectic approach allows language teachers "to absorb the best techniques of all the well-known language-teaching methods into their classroom procedures, using them for the purposes for which they are most appropriate" (Rivers, 1981, p. 55). This is necessary and important because teachers "faced with the daily task of helping students to learn a new language cannot afford the luxury of complete dedication to each new method or approach that comes into vogue." (1981, p. 54).

3. The interlacement between foreign language teaching and other disciplines

Pica (2005) claimed that “as teachers and researchers, we cannot work in isolation with each other if we are to help our students meet their needs and accomplish their goals” (p.49).on this basis, foreign language teaching researchers, are called to estimate teachers’ ideas to invent a teaching method and techniques that can be more germane to classroom circumstances and hence more likely to be reliable for both teacher and learner. McDonough and McDonough (1990) revealed that most teachers had used the research findings, about language, in teaching.

Scholars have questioned if there is an interrelationship between pedagogy and foreign language teaching as a brunch of applied linguistics. Ellis (1997) noted the two disciplines. i.e. pedagogy and foreign language teaching research interact in two opposite directions. In one place, learning theory, foreign language teaching techniques methods ...etc and any research conducted by a foreign language teaching researcher as an applied linguist should be scrutinized in the classroom to prove or disapprove if they are practical. For teaching methods can be tested by observing the effect of methods on students(Oxford,2001) Evaluating the findings of foreign language teaching in the classroom from a pedagogical viewpoint is somehow problematic because the researchers(foreign language teaching researchers) teachers and pedagogues have different views about what is relevant in teaching a foreign language. In the second place, instead of evaluating foreign language teaching researches in the classroom, pedagogical issues and problems related to classroom performance are shifted to foreign language teaching research.

Each direction has some pitfalls. The first direction (from foreign language research to other disciplines (psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics) is too theoretical, because foreign language teaching researchers do not cover all psychological, sociologic and pedagogic issues like (language anxiety, classroom management....) as they have their theoretical concerns (Crookes, 1997; Ellis, 1997). The second direction (from other disciplines to foreign language research) may be more pertinent because it is practical although it addressed only all issues sociological, psychological and pedagogical.

Accordingly, to get a holistic view of foreign language teaching and to besiege all issues in foreign language teaching, a multidisciplinary approach is demanded. Interaction between foreign language teaching researchers and teachers/ sociolinguistics,

psycholinguistics, and pedagogy is very crucial, it bridges the gap between what is theoretically said and what is happened (Lightbown, 2000). A ‘cross-fertilization’ between foreign language teaching as a brunch of applied linguistics and teaching can put an end to many problems faced by teacher and learner.

4. A multidisciplinary approach to FLL/FLT: Disadvantages

Although integrative studies including multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches are idealized as the preeminent approach in any topic and particularly in teaching a foreign language, they are also associated with several pitfalls.

This is ironic because the multidisciplinary approach itself is influenced by the problems of other disciplines. This is not surprising because each discipline is questioning a lot of issues. This simply shows how complex and risky to conduct multidisciplinary research. For example, tough psycholinguistics provide many answers explaining the process of language learning, teachers and foreign language researchers find themselves involved in new debates like language anxiety,

The direct implication of this is that researchers are cut off from a reconsideration of their professional practices, In a word, and researchers, particularly beginners, are lost between disciplines and missed their foremost problem. Also, adopting the multidisciplinary approach can be unsafe as a researcher may fall into a state of arbitrariness because he /she does not have a specific theoretical ground.

Furthermore, mixing findings and data from different disciplines may result in new conflicts and problems.

Nonetheless, though there are many other weaknesses of the multidisciplinary approach, the approach is more advantageous for qualified researchers and more disadvantageous for beginners researchers. Most of the weaknesses mentioned above are only justifiable when researchers are poorly trained and prepared for the research.

5. The Multidisciplinary approach to FLL/FLT: Advantages

Though the participants interviewed in this paper especially qualified researchers agree that there is no approach better than another, they appreciate the multidisciplinary approach and agree that are a lot of advantages in using this approach. Two advantages were mentioned:

- The multidisciplinary approach to FLL/FLT is important because it allows the researcher to choose what is appropriate in their topic and research problem.
- It allows researchers in FLL/FLT to get benefits from previous research from different disciplines(didactic, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics.....) because languages have many facets and aspects.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, working on foreign language learning/teaching is an intricate engagement for language has several levels, and it is multifaceted, requiring proficiency in several areas of knowledge that make up language only when considered, equally, together. Therefore, FLT has become like a ‘factory’ in which different disciplines(didactics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics.....) actively operate homogeneously. Divergent disciplines tend to recommend collecting different types of evidence from research sources. Psycholinguistics,

for instance, is typically required to resolve psychological problems that hamper learning a foreign language; didactics may help how to manage a classroom, pedagogy may provide strategies, methods, and various techniques associated with teaching and instruction. Experts in FLL/FLT are likely to gather data from such different disciplines to get a holistic view of how to teach a foreign language.

References

- Andrade, M., & Williams, K. (2009). Foreign language learning anxiety in Japanese EFL university classes: Physical, emotional, expressive, and verbal reactions. *Sophia Junior College Faculty Journal*, 29(1), 1-24.
- Choi, C.K., Pak, A.W.P., (2006). Multidisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, and transdisciplinarity in health research, services, education, and policy: 1. Definitions, objectives, and evidence of effectiveness. *Clinical Investment in Medicine*, 29 (6): 351-364.
- Collard, F. (1904). *La méthode directe dans l'enseignement des langues vivantes* (3^d ed.). Bruxelles: Maison d'édition Alfred Castaigne.
- Ellis, R. (1994). Consciousness in second language learning: psychological perspectives on the role of conscious processes in vocabulary acquisition. *Aila Review*, 11, 37-57.
- Ellis, R. (1997). SLA and language pedagogy: An educational perspective. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 19, 69-92. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0272263197001058>
- Ganschow, L., Sparks, R. L., & Javorsky, J. (1998). Foreign language learning difficulties: A historical perspective. *Journal of learning disabilities*, 31(3), 248-258.
- Klein, J. T. (1990). *Interdisciplinarity: History, theory, and practice*. Wayne State University Press.
- Lightbown, P. (2000). Anniversary article: Classroom SLA research and second language teaching. *Applied Linguistics*, 21(4), 431-462. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/applin/21.4.431>
- Lombardo, T. (2010). Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to futures education. *Journal of Future Studies*, 14(4), 121-134.
- McDonough, J., & McDonough, S. (1990). What's the use of research? *ELT Journal*, 44(2), 102-109. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/elt/44.2.102>
- Niculescu, B. (2018). The transdisciplinary evolution of the university condition for sustainable development. In *Transdisciplinary Theory, Practice and Education* (pp. 73-81). Springer, Cham.
- Oxford, R. (2001). Integrated Skills in the ESL/EFL classroom. *ESL Magazine*, 6, 1-2.
- Pica, T. (2005). Second language acquisition research and applied linguistics. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 263-280). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

- Sapir, E. (1949). *Selected writings in language, culture, and personality*. University of California Press.
- Sapir, E. (1993). The status of linguistics as a science. *Landmarks of American Language and Linguistics*, 1, 9-14.
- Stern, H. (1992). *Issues and options in language teaching*. A P. Allain & J. Harley (Eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sweet, H. (1964). *The practical study of languages: A guide for teachers and learners*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Tanveer, M. (2007). *Investigation of the factors that cause language anxiety for ESL/EFL learners in learning speaking skills and the influence it casts on communication in the target language*. (master's thesis). Retrieved from <file:///C:/Users/asus/Downloads/Investigatingthefactorsthatcauselanguageanxiety.pdf>
- The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary. Volumes 1 and 2. (1944) London: Oxford University Press