An Interview with Sandra Lee McKay

Sandra Lee McKay is Professor of English at San Francisco State University, where she teaches ESL methods and materials development and sociolinguistics. She has trained English teachers in many countries, including the Philippines and South Africa, on Fulbright and U S I S grants. On her visit to CULI (Chulalongkorn University Language Institute) to give a presentation at the National Seminar entitled "Activating English : Putting Life into ELT", PASAA was honoured to interview her. The questions and answers in the interview proceeded as follows:

Q: Could you tell us why classroom communication is important in the language learning process as a whole?

A: You learn a language by using it. In a place where English is taught as a foreign language, like Thailand, where students are not using the language outside the classroom then it is important that the classroom be used for generating the use of English. The more you can encourage students to use the classroom as a place to practise English, the better it is. Whereas in places like the United States, students are able to do some practising outside.

Q: As you may realize, Thai students tend to be shy. They are hesitant to interact or communicate, especially in English. They are afraid of making mistakes and being laughed at. Is there anything we can do to reduce their inhibition and get them to interact?

A: If you can get them interested in their topic so that they really want to communicate about it, then they probably will not be as shy. But let us say they are very interested about a task, finding out about each other's families or interviewing each other about things they want to be in the future, well it would be very natural for them to speak in Thai. That is an issue teachers have to deal with. One way that teachers can do that is, even though they give the students a task, and the student may resort to Thai, they can ask that every time there is group work there is some kind of written report in English. That could be done to encourage students to use some English in their groups. Even if they are using some Thai when they discuss with one another, if they have to turn in just a brief report in English then they have to talk in English in order to get the report written. So you could pick motivating topics to encourage them to talk, and to help monitor the use of English, rather than Thai, you could ask for some kind of written report of what they talked about in their groups.

Q: So we should not mind if they talk in Thai in pairs?

A: We should encourage them not to, but it is only natural. People are going to want to communicate with one another in their native language. That is a very natural kind of communication and it's artificial for two people who share a language to resort to a

language they are not as fluent in.

Q: When we ask them to do group work they turn back to Thai and enjoy the activity, but we do not know if they learn the language or not.

A: You can constantly encourage them and say: "No, we are here to practise, try to use English." The teacher can just keep telling them "there are not a lot of opportunities to practise English outside so let us make the classroom a place where we can practise." It is a game. "Let us see if we can really try to use English even though it is more difficult." That may be another thing. But the more excited they get about the topic, the more they may want to go back to Thai because obviously they really want to communicate, and it is so much easier to communicate in Thai.

Q: If you aim at communication among the students like that, in group work or pair work, you do not encourage a lot of correction.

A: I would probably not, especially if your goal is fluency, but that does not mean a teacher cannot be an assessor. I would circulate amongst the groups, listen for common errors the students are making, note them down, and then after the activity is over bring the class together and say: "Now here are some things that I have heard and we will work on." There may be some correction going on, but rather than correction I would say feedback, if the students are in groups and they do not know a particular vocabulary item or they do not know how to express something in English, with the teacher circulating they may stop and say: "How do I say that in English?" That is a role for the teacher as a resource person, both monitoring what they say and being there to provide them with English.

Q: Usually we like the students to do pair work or group work and we think you can

learn from each other and my role is either facilitator or monitor and we float around. But then most students, especially my adult students, feel they cannot learn anything from fellow students. They like to interact, but they want to interact with the teacher. Do you have any suggestions?

A: Research on groups and dyads shows that they allow for comprehensible input. The students' are at about the same level and are able to negotiate the meaning and make sure that they are understanding one another. Group work also allows students to be productive to a greater extent, because if each student only wants to interact with the teacher it is only one teacher but thirty students. If they are willing to negotiate meaning with partners then there is a lot more opportunity for them to produce English rather than waiting for one turn each hour to say something.

Q: But their observation is: "I talk to my friends but they do not speak good English and I do not speak good English." They are not sure whether they should continue with that or not.

A: I understand they want a model, a native speaker model. That is a nice thing to have, but part of learning a language is not just listening, but also producing and the group work allows them to take a risk and apply what they already know. They know all these rules and have mimicked learning those rules, now they have a chance to apply those rules, to say something to another person, and that is a very important part of learning too.

Q: In terms of the pair work activity, should we pair up weak students with good students, or good with good? What is your opinion on that?

A: That depends on the task. I think both of them can operate. There are benefits to having a better student with a less proficient

student. The proficient student feels they know something and assumes the role of teacher, and a teacher learns by doing. The weaker student will then learn from the more advanced student. For some kinds of activities where you are trying to do a co-operative task, perhaps in competition with other groups, it helps for students to be at an equal level so that they can all contribute. So I think the teacher has to decide what the purpose of the task is and then how to go about grouping students.

Q: What do you think of students who prefer to work on their own rather than in groups? Should we sometimes ask students to work on their own?

A: Sometimes there are tasks they can do on their own. Perhaps you can ask students to keep a journal, a reading journal in which they can jot down their own ideas. Or if you are using a piece of literature it is nice for students to first clarify in their own minds if they enjoy it and what it means to them. Such individual tasks are very important and can form the basis of group work. Perhaps you might give them a poem and they have to write down in their journal whether or not they like it and why. Then you might pair a student who does not like it with one who does and they talk about why they have a different opinion on the poem. But the individual work allows them to clarify their own views about something first.

Q: In CULI we are in the process of revising our materials and we have to create more interactive activities. Could you suggest some language activities that will enhance classroom communication? What are the communication activities that you would recommend for teaching reading, writing and other skills?

A: There are various ways you could put students in groups for different purposes.

Sometimes you could put students in groups and the purpose is they are going to negotiate meaning; I am thinking of information gap activities where one student has some information and one has other information they then have to negotiate to share the information. At other times they really want to persuade the other person to accept their viewpoint; for example, if they have given their feelings about a piece of literature and one likes it and one does not then they have to convince the other person to their particular end. At other times a group can have a co-operative task; for example, if you make teams in your class and the one that can first reach a particular goal wins, then all the group is working co-operatively. So you can have different tasks for your groups, some can be negotiating (trying to figure out what information the other person has), sometimes they are trying to convince their partners, sometimes they are trying to co-operate with their partners. All three kinds of group work could be used.

Q: When you talk about negotiating, does that also refer to activities like jigsaw reading?

A: I am thinking more of actual information gaps where one person has one map and all the names or places, and the other person has another one and has to find out from their partner, to complete their activity, what their partner knows. Then they are basically sharing information and they basically fulfill their task by getting some information from the other person.

Q: What about jigsaw reading? The underlying principle is the same.

A: Right, they want to find out what their partner knows that they do not know. They are trying to negotiate that meaning. But the other thing you can have, which is more co-operative, is to have teams that are trying to

pool their resources so that they can do something better than another team. Then you are not really negotiating, you are not trying to find out something they know that you do not know, you are just trying to pool everything you know so you can do a task better than another group.

Q: The reason why I ask this question is because in our present materials we make use of a lot of jigsaw reading and it does not work. For example, Student A will read one piece, then Student B will read his, but we end up teaching both pieces and going through both pieces with the whole class. Thus we have class teaching instead of having them work in pairs. I do not know how we can solve this problem. The principle is good, but there are some other factors involved. For example: "I have some information but I do not understand everything," or "I do not understand what she is asking so I cannot give the answer," something like that, that is one thing. Also the students are not used to the idea of sharing information like this, although they do it in real life situations.

A: What you could do is divide the class so the teacher works through Part A with one group and makes sure that they understand it then works with Group B and makes sure they understand their reading, then pairs them together. The logistical problem is to separate Group A from Group B in one class. But that way you could make sure they each understand their own part before they get together and share the information.

Q: A problem is also in the level of difficulty. The reading is too difficult for them although the exercise is very good. The next question is about assessment of the students' ability to communicate. It is not like accuracy, which is very easy. How can we assess the students' ability to communicate?

A: I do not like to separate the ability to communicate and accuracy because to me the ability to communicate includes accuracy, so that when we talk, like Canale and Swain talk about communicative competence, one element of that is grammatical ability. Unfortunately there has been this idea that communicative competence is one thing but accuracy is another thing. I would rather assess students on communicative competence. That includes their grammatical accuracy, their ability to use socio-linguistic rules so they are using language appropriately, and their ability to repair, to use strategic competence to repair a conversation that was not working well. All those things go into communicative competence so in an assessment we have got to be looking at all of them. Otherwise it is as if fluency is just being able to ramble on and be grammatically inaccurate and inappropriate, but you can just talk. That is not really being fluent or communicatively competent. I would rather take it all together.

Q: But would you give more weight to one than the other? I understand they are both important but if somebody is giving me directions, I understand the directions but some final 's' for the third person singular is missing, or some articles are missing, I would say his communicative ability is quite high but his grammatical accuracy is quite low. Perhaps you can express weightings as a percentage?

A: Something like in holistic reading which has certain scales--perhaps two points for fluency, two points for accuracy, and two points for discourse organisation. The same thing is done in interviews in the Foreign Service Institute where there are actual scales and you get so many points for each one. Accuracy should be part of that, but it should not be the predominant thing. That sometimes happens, again, using the parallel with writing, sometimes teachers have said "well it is accurate, then it is a perfect paper" and that is

not the case. The ability to use the language accurately should be one component of communicative competence.

Q: It is important but it should not be predominant in assessing?

A: No, not predominant.

Q: Talking about grading essays. What is your view of criterion related holistic marking schemes for grading essays, such as TOEFL, TWE, 126 marking scheme, as opposed to analytical marking schemes, such as Holly Jacobs. How is one more reliable and effective than the other?

A: The reliability of holistic assessment depends on how much the groups of readers have been trained. If they are highly trained it seems that they are able to do a holistic assessment and then come up with a mark on the six point scale. The analytic is a little bit more fine tuned because you can pinpoint more exactly where a person is having problems. If you do just a holistic assessment on a six point scale you come up with a number and if it is a four you do not know if that person was four because of grammatical accuracy or because of fulfilling the task, whereas if you do analytic you get a finer tune of this person. You know that he got a four because he did not really address the task. So the analytic is a finer tuning scale.

Q: I would like to talk about the communicative syllabus that seems to predominate these days. To what extent should grammar have a role? How much grammar should we have in a communicative syllabus? By communicative I mean that you focus on functions.

A: First of all that should not be just called communicative because communicative, as I said, going back to Canale and Swain, means grammatical accuracy. It is unfortunate that we have this notion of a dichotomy, that it is

either functional or grammatical. You need to be able to use the language accurately to fulfill a purpose, whether it be to request information, seek clarification or whatever. Thus the best kind of syllabus, in my view, would be one to integrate the function and the grammar together. The way that could be done is once you identify a function, let us say something like requests for information, in order to communicate, then there would be certain grammar points that would be very relevant, in this case modals would be very relevant-- "would you mind?" or " could I use?" , those kinds of things. You can combine your function with an appropriate grammatical point; that is the best kind of material. Some texts do that very well where they have a fuctional goal and a grammatical goal, and they integrate the two.

Q: In your opinion, what kind of syllabus seems to work best?

A: I would go for an integrated one, one that would combine a grammatical point, a function and topic or theme. The students would have a theme they would be talking about for a particular purpose, like clarifying, with a particular grammatical point they would be practising. Things like that I think would be the strongest kinds of materials.

Q: In CULI we seem to go in different directions. For example, we have the Foundation English courses which are function based, EAP courses (second level courses) for second year students tend to be topic oriented. So which direction should we start with?

A: What you are doing makes sense. It seems to me that at certain levels of proficiency, whereas you are going to try to integrate things like topic, function and grammar, that at the beginning levels the emphasis would be on grammar. Until you have a foundation in the verb 'to be' and imperatives you cannot

express a function. You might have more emphasis on the grammatical in the beginning, moving on to the functional at the intermediate level and then to topic, to more English for special purposes, at a more advanced level. There is a progression; you would be giving consideration to all three at all times but you would be emphasising one depending on the level of the students' proficiency level.

Q: You have been working in the Philipines, South Africa and the United States. From your experience do you see any difference in students' motivation in wanting to communicate in the classroom?

A: There will be higher motivation in students if they need to use the language. My students who were settling in the United States, where English is the medium of instruction, were very motivated. That is less in countries where English is a foreign language. Motivation is a bigger concern for teachers in an EFL setting than an ESL setting.

Q: What was it like for South African Student?

A: For many of them English has many overtones. For many in the black communities they realize that English is going to hold the key, and probably play a strong role, in a post-apartheid South Africa where English may very well be the sole medium. Now Africaans and English are both the medium of instruction. They realize English will be needed. On the other hand they see English as a former colonial language, as it is in many countries, and they reject that as an imposed language. So they have a very ambivalent attitude towards English. What they would

like to do is use English not as the English of Great Britain or America, but as the English of South Africa so that they would have their own literature and certain characteristics that would be their own. Something similar is happening in the Philipines where you hear about Filipino English; there they say: "We have our own language."

Q: What about the general character of the people, are the South African students quite shy or quite outgoing?

A: I have trouble answering questions like that. I try very hard to avoid forming generalisation because they get so close to stereotypes. The reason I guard against that is because in the United States we have different cultural groups and I am training teachers to teach these different cultural groups. If we then spend our class time talking about these kinds of students as reserved and these other kinds as talkative then as soon as they get a Thai student, or a South African student, or a Hispanic student they think this is the way that student is going to be when there is such variance among individuals that I prefer not to stereotype. I have heard two sterotypes since I have been here from Thais; one is that Thais are very reserved and the second thing is that Thais never read. Neither one of them holds truth for me. The people I have worked with, since I have been here, have been very outgoing and very well read, so for me that stereotype does not work.

Q: Those are all the questions we have for our interview. We have learned a lot. Thank you very much for your time.

A: Thank you.

Notes : This interview was conducted by Supanee Tiancharoen, and Ubolrat Thengtrirat, while Anthony Reardon transcribed and edited it.