

The ‘complexity turn’ in applied linguistics

Implications for instructed SLA

It was 1997 when Diane Larsen-Freeman made the then startling proposal that the relatively new science of chaos/complexity theory, which had gained prominence at the forefront of discussions in the natural sciences, might also illuminate long-standing issues in applied linguistics. Indeed, twenty years later, central qualities of complex systems—that they are complex, dynamic, context-dependent, adaptive, self-organizing, nonlinear, emergent, unpredictable, and unstable to the point of seemingly being chaotic, to mention but a few—have become ubiquitous in applied linguistics discourse, for describing language itself, along with its use, evolution, development, and its learning and teaching.

The presentation will examine what a ‘complexity’ turn means for instructed SLA. For, while the epistemological and ontological assumptions of complexity theory in principle allow for a much richer understanding of some aspects of instructed language development, its major characteristics profoundly question guiding assumptions, established practices, and pervasive commitments in educational settings. In order to realize its considerable potential both for revitalizing language teaching and learning and for advancing theorizing and researching instructed L2 development it is therefore critical to reflect on the inherent tensions that a complex systems approach introduces into instructed SLA.

I will pursue such considerations in three selected areas that arise from complexity theory: (a) its system orientation, which requires some way of specifying the instructional context as a system; (b) its focus on emergence, change, and long-term development, which demands an extended educational vision; and (c) its inherently non-linear and relational nature, which privileges interpretive retrodiction in order to understand instructed L2 development as contrasted with the more customary focus on prediction and cause-and-effect relationships. I propose curricular thinking as one way to begin to address these challenges.