

INTERVIEW: NINA SPADA

**'MY GOALS ARE TO MAKE MY RESEARCH
ACCESSIBLE AND MEANINGFUL
TO TEACHERS'**

*By Jelena Matic**

I had a privilege to meet and to interview Dr Nina Spada at the Foreign Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics Conference (FLTAL) in Sarajevo in May 2015.



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BELLS: Dr Spada, thank you very much for dedicating some of your time to BELLS readers. Being a leading international expert on the role of instruction in Second Language Acquisition, could you tell us how you became interested in the topic?

NINA SPADA: I am glad you asked me that question because many applied linguists, certainly researchers working in my area of research, instructed second language acquisition, came to this field initially because they were teachers of second and foreign languages. I taught English as a second language quite a few years before I went to graduate school and began to do my research. I was always interested in the effectiveness of my instruction as a teacher and so that was what motivated me to go and continue my studies and to become a researcher investigating the effects of instruction on second language learning; looking at it not only from a teacher's perspective but also from a researchers perspective.

BELLS: Did you have role models in teaching when you were at school?

NINA SPADA: When I think about it the first thought that comes to mind is that my role models were teachers who challenged me and believed that I had potential and promise. Other role models included teachers who were particularly attentive and who took the time to recognize that learners vary tremendously in their learning styles and tried to accommodate that in their instructional practice.

BELLS: The book *How Languages are Learned* which you co-authored with Dr Patsy Lightbown is used internationally. And the fourth edition was published in January 2013. Which chapter was the most difficult to write?

NINA SPADA: Good question! Probably the chapter on theories of second language learning because it tends to be more abstract than the other chapters in the book. In fact, you may have noticed that in the 4th edition of 'How Languages are Learned' we changed the order of the chapters putting the *Individual Differences* chapter before the *Theories* chapter thinking that once the teachers have the opportunity to read and think a little bit more about more concrete issues and factors that they can relate to in their own language learning experiences first, (e.g. how motivation &

personality contribute to successful learning) these reflections may prepare them better for the chapter on theories of second language learning. No matter how much one tries to write clearly and accessibly and make the information as comprehensible as possible that chapter has always been the most challenging for us to write. It's also been difficult to revise and update it because there's so much more research to cover with every new edition and also theoretical work contributing to different ideas and views about second language learning. So yes that chapter is a tricky one and we're hoping that moving it a little later in the book will work better for readers.

BELLS: The book *How Languages are Learned* published by Oxford University Press won the first prize in the Duke of Edinburgh Book Competition.

NINA SPADA: Yes.

BELLS: How did you feel when you learnt about it and could you tell us about the receiving of the award at Buckingham Palace in 1993?

NINA SPADA: That was unbelievable. It was a complete and utter surprise. We had no idea that the book had even been nominated for the award, so suddenly, out of the blue, we received a call from the offices of Oxford University Press saying "Can you come to London in ten days from now... there's going to be a special event at Buckingham Palace" and we thought "My goodness!" Unfortunately my co-author Patsy Lightbown could not come because she was doing some work in Australia at the time. So, I went by myself, but of course I was accompanied with people from Oxford University Press and it was a very special day to be driving up to the Palace and then going inside the Palace and meeting Prince Philip. He was the one who presented the award because it is in his name – the Duke of Edinburgh English Language Book Competition. It was a very special occasion.

BELLS: At the University of Toronto you teach courses in second language acquisition, research methods, the role of instruction in L2 learning. Is there any that you would single out as special for any reason?

NINA SPADA: Oh, I enjoy all the courses that I teach — courses in language learning and teaching to undergraduate students as well as courses in instructed second language acquisition and research methods to graduate students. Most of the students I work with are doing their Masters or PhD but I also get a lot of pleasure teaching an undergraduate course where I use ‘How Languages are Learned’. It’s interesting to observe how students respond to a book that I have written and to get their input about changes and improvements to make.

BELLS: Are today’s generations that you teach different from those before in the sense of their passion for knowledge and research?

NINA SPADA: That’s an interesting question. Actually, I don’t think so. I haven’t noticed a huge difference. One of the advantages today of course are the kinds of resources that are available to students that make the research literature much more accessible to them for example, via digital libraries. Thus students today are able to read more extensively and get hold of material and information more quickly than students in the past because they have so much greater access in most places in the world. But to answer your question more directly, no I haven’t noticed many differences in terms of students’ “passion for knowledge and research” over the years.

BELLS: Where do your students come from: Canada, international?

NINA SPADA: My students come from all over the world. They are very international, particularly at the graduate level. In fact, right now I’m a Visiting Professor at Bogazici University in Istanbul, Turkey. I’m there because one of my former PhD students is a faculty member at that university and I am spending some time co-teaching a course with her as well as consulting with graduate students and faculty members in her department.

BELLS: That's very nice.

NINA SPADA: Yes it's a great opportunity and privilege.

BELLS: Where is the applied linguistics research going nowadays?

NINA SPADA: That's a difficult question to answer because applied linguistics is a huge field and I obviously can't speak for all of it. However, within my area of expertise, instructed second language acquisition (SLA), one of the changes has been a shift from more cognitively oriented approaches to SLA to more socially oriented approaches and a recognition that both perspectives provide important insights and knowledge about SLA. Also and related to this is that for a long time there was a high concentration of quantitative research in SLA and not as much qualitative research, but that has changed considerably in recent decades. So, there's much more bridging and coming together of different perspectives both epistemologically in terms of methodology as well as conceptually with regard to cognitive and social theories.

BELLS: Do you think that there is a gap between theoretical and practical research in today's world of linguistics?

NINA SPADA: Yes, I think, unfortunately, there is a gap. It's often difficult to make research accessible to practitioners. Not all research is necessarily relevant to practitioners, but in the field of applied linguistics, with an emphasis on "applied", one necessarily has greater expectations for the applicability of what happens in terms of research and practice. I have always made it one of my goals as a researcher to do research that is relevant to classroom practice and to communicate my research in ways that are accessible and meaningful to teachers. That's very much been part of who I am as an applied linguist.

BELLS: You have been involved in meaning and form research for more 25 years now?

NINA SPADA: Yes, that's right.

BELLS: Where does that interest come from?

NINA SPADA: Well, when I was a novice teacher of English as a second language, it was during the time that the strong version of communicative language teaching was establishing itself in North America. This included a rejection of the teaching of grammar that was associated with more traditional structure-based approaches (e.g. grammar translation and the audiolingual method). During that time there was a huge pendulum swing from the teaching of discrete-point grammar to no attention to grammar or very little. While I recognized and supported the need for a more communicative/meaning-based approach to L2 teaching, I was concerned at the time that the pendulum had swung too far and we were forgetting about language and the need to include grammar and a focus on form in L2 instruction. My belief was that it was important to figure out ways how to do this within a communicative context. So, as a teacher I felt pressure to go in a direction that I wasn't entirely convinced was the best way. That definitely motivated me later on as a researcher to investigate the effects of form-based and meaning-based instruction to SLA.

BELLS: What is your newest project or research?

NINA SPADA: Most of my work right now is focusing on what I talked about in my plenary at this conference. I'm investigating the different ways in which one can draw learners' attention to form within meaning based/communicative instruction and examining their effects on L2 learning. Yesterday I talked about isolated and integrated form focused instruction and the advantages of both types for L2 learning. I argued that sometimes it's necessary to isolate a particular aspect of language in order for the learner to notice it, practice it, and consolidate it. Other aspects of language may be best learned if they are integrated into communicative practice. So my current research is looking at the effects of these different types of instruction and examining whether they contribute to different types of L2 knowledge. I'm also working on another project that might be of interest to you and your readers. It's related to 'How Languages are Learned'. A few years ago, the publishers of that book, Oxford University Press (OUP) invited me and my co-author Patsy Lightbown to develop a new book series targeted to primary and secondary school teachers of English as second/foreign language. As you know, 'How Languages are Learned' presents research on second language learning in general terms

across a wide range of topic areas. OUP wanted us to develop a book series in which individual volumes focus on research in specific topic areas (e.g. assessment, literacy, technology) and like ‘How Languages are Learned’ would make the research accessible and meaningful to teachers. This relates to your previous question about bridging the gap between theory, research and practice – the reason why Patsy Lightbown and I wrote ‘How Languages are Learned’ in the first place and also why we agreed to co-edit this new book series. It is called ‘Oxford Key Concepts for the Language Classroom’ and the titles of some of the books in the series are: ‘Focus on content-based language teaching’; ‘Focus on oral interaction’; ‘Focus on reading comprehension’; ‘Focus on grammar and meaning’. They have been written in a “user friendly” style making connections between theory, research, and practice in accessible ways.

BELLS: Thank you very much for sharing this with us. You have made significant contributions to international projects related to the teaching and learning of second and foreign languages including those sponsored by the European Commission on the teaching and learning of second and foreign languages. Could you tell us something more about their significance now when the EU is expanding?

NINA SPADA: It has been some time since I worked directly with the European Commission on the teaching and learning of second and foreign languages but probably the most recent contribution that I have made has to do with the explosion of CLIL — Content and Language Integrated Learning – not only in Europe but in other parts of the world as well (e.g. South America, Asia). I don’t know to what extent CLIL has been moving into Serbia?

BELLS: Very slowly... to some parts of Serbia and Belgrade.

NINA SPADA: As you know, CLIL has been influenced to a great extent by the development of English as a lingua franca in the world. It combines subject matter instruction and language instruction at the primary secondary and tertiary levels in which students study their subject areas (e.g. history, science) in English. Obviously CLIL is of interest to me because of my

ongoing research on how best to combine form and meaning (i.e. content) in L2 instruction.

BELLS: You travel widely as a plenary speaker. How do you relax? Do you read or do you do something completely unrelated to the teaching and instruction?

NINA SPADA: Absolutely. I do lots of things to relax. In the summer, when the weather is warm in Canada, I enjoy rollerblading and biking and walking — I love to be outdoors exercising. In the winters I do pilates and yoga indoors. Also, I have recently taken up something that I left behind a long time ago. When I was young I played the piano for many years and stopped when I was about 18 years old. Two years ago, I got a piano and I am starting to play again which is bringing me much pleasure. I also love to read, to listen to music, to go to the cinema and to cook.

BELLS: In the end, would you like to share with us an anecdote or something that made a big impression on you while travelling?

NINA SPADA: I have been so fortunate to travel to many countries and to feel so welcome. I'm afraid I can't think of a specific anecdote right now but I just feel very lucky to be working in an area where I am able to discover so much about the world and to meet many interesting people. I am very privileged in that respect.

BELLS: Thank you very much for your time, Dr Spada. It was very pleasant to talk to you.

NINA SPADA: You are welcome. It was lovely to talk to you, too.