Young, Richard

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Richard Frederick Young was born in London on October 15 in 1948. After graduating from Oxford with a degree in philosophy, politics, and economics, he taught at the University of Turin, then returned to England to earn a master's degree in applied linguistics from the University of Reading. He was with the British Council in Hong Kong as Materials and Methodology Officer before settling in the United States in 1983. Young earned his PhD in educational linguistics from the University of Pennsylvania in 1989, with a dissertation that was the first extension of quantitative variation theory to interlanguage. He then taught at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale until he joined the faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1993, where he is currently Professor in English Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition. Young has also held visiting professorships at Pennsylvania State University, International Islamic University of Malaysia, and two universities in Germany.

Richard Young is known for his works on interactional modifications of input, variation in second language acquisition, social interaction in oral proficiency tests and, most recently, discursive practice theory. An overarching theme in Young's research is the dynamic relationship between the use of language and the social contexts that language reflects and creates. His research has focused on change—how newcomers learn to participate in the practices of a new community. Young's work crosses conventional boundaries between academic fields to bring interdisciplinary insights to issues of second language learning. His research has been published in three single-authored books, one edited volume, and over 50 journal articles and anthologies in applied linguistics.

Young's curiosity about social interaction and language learning began with his research on the role of interactionally modified input and negotiation of meaning. Working both collaboratively and independently (Pica, Young, & Doughty, 1987; Young, 1988), Young built on the concept that input is better comprehended when it is modified in interaction through negotiation of meaning than when it is premodified for learners. Pica, Young, and Doughty's coauthored article in *TESOL Quarterly* was reprinted a few years later, in 1994, and the study continues to inform researchers working on the nature and role of comprehensible input in second language acquisition.

Young's focus on contextual factors in second language acquisition then turned to the area of variation. His (1991) study of plural marking by Chinese learners of English pioneered the utilization of a multivariate model in order to simultaneously examine several linguistic and social factors that may lead to variation in interlanguage and to determine the relative weight of each of the factors being considered. This approach advanced the field by providing a richer and more adequate description of learners' interlanguage compared to previous studies, which sometimes had found conflicting results because of a more limited focus on one single factor at a time. Young discovered, for example, that interlanguage development, linguistic environment, and communicative redundancy were factors influencing the learners' plural marking, but the ethnicity of the interlocutor had little influence. In addition to studying the variation of plural marking, Young has also investigated variation in learners' production of other morphemes, including articles, copula, past-tense marking, progressive marking, and third person singular (Young, 1986,

1996). Methodologically, Young's employment of the computer software VARBRUL (originally developed by Henrietta J. Cedergren and David Sankoff in 1974) also helped introduce applied linguists to a powerful tool to analyze systematic variation in learner language (e.g., Bayley & Preston, 1996). The lasting relevance of Young's research on the influence of contextual factors on interlanguage production can be seen in the fact that it is referenced in most current standard texts on second language acquisition.

Young's interest in variation extended to investigations of discourse variation in oral proficiency interviews, which was presented in an influential coedited volume with Agnes He (1998), *Talking and Testing: Discourse Approaches to the Assessment of Oral Proficiency*, and several articles (Young & Milanovic, 1992; Young, 1995, 2002). Young's approach combines discourse analysis and language assessment and results in some of the earliest empirical discourse analyses of interactions designed to assess spoken English proficiency. By looking at oral proficiency as both tests and texts, researchers were able to observe phenomena that are crucial for testing practice. For example, in an analysis of language proficiency interviews with Mexican and Japanese learners of English of different levels, Young and Halleck (1998) found that the learners' discourse patterns during the standardized interviews might have been influenced by their native languages, their personalities, and proficiency levels. Importantly, a learner may be rated below his proficiency level when his interlanguage discourse patterns are perceived negatively by the interviewer. A significant contribution of this volume is He and Young's (1998) outline of the slippery construct of *interactional competence*. They defined it as being co-constructed, practice-sensitive, and including the following components: rhetorical scripts, specific lexis and syntactic structures, strategies for managing turns, management of topics, and discourse devices for signaling boundaries. This conceptualization of interactional competence provides a useful framework for several studies on the development of interactional competence (e.g., Young & Miller, 2004; Hellermann, 2006, 2007, 2008; Nguyen, 2006, 2008) and later became an important part in Young's theorization of discursive practice.

Young's theory of discursive practice (2007, 2008, 2009) is a culmination of his empirical studies and theoretical reflections on language and context. In this theory, Young brought together insights from an eclectic range of fields—including the philosophy of language, linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics, systemic functional grammar, conversation analysis, critical applied linguistics, and sociocultural theory—in order to provide a comprehensive and coherent description and discussion of the dynamic and reflexive relationship between language and context in social interaction, and how this understanding comes to bear on language learning and teaching. Young defined practices as episodes of social interaction that entail "the construction and reflection of social realities through actions that invoke identity, ideology, belief, and power" (2008, p. 1). Discursive practices, by extension, are practices that involve language. Resting on the notions that language reflects and creates context and context comes into being through language use, Young conceptualized discursive practice theory as aiming to "explain the ways in which the global context affects the local employment of resources and vice versa" (2008, p. 3). Drawing from his earlier studies of variation and oral proficiency tests as well as his more recent works on modes of meaning in a science class (Young & Nguyen, 2002), performance of listenership in social interaction (Young & Lee, 2007), and the role of affect in second language acquisition (Garrett & Young, 2009), Young vividly described the multiple aspects and layers of context from linguistic, ethnographic, emotional, and political perspectives as well as the specific verbal and nonverbal resources involved in discursive practices. What is particularly relevant for research on second language acquisition is Young's thought-provoking discussion about how the abilities to participate in a discursive practice may be learned, taught, and assessed.

In addition to his own research, Young was the editor of the interdisciplinary *Language Learning Monograph Series* from 1994 to 2006. During this time, he was the series editor of five volumes by leading authors in the field, covering the topics of language testing (Tim McNamara & Carsten Roever, 2006), classroom interaction (Paul Seedhouse, 2004), pragmatic development in a second language (Gabriele Kasper & Kenneth Rose, 2002), tense and aspect in second language acquisition (Kathleen Bardovi-Harlig, 2000), and affect in language learning (John Schumann, 1998). These volumes report on current theories and recent findings with forward-looking perspectives on future developments in the field. Young has also been on the editorial boards of three major journals, *Language Learning*, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, and the *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, and he recently became the editor of another book series, *Trends in Applied Linguistics*. During 2005–6, he served as President of the American Association for Applied Linguistics and chaired the 14th World Congress of Applied Linguistics in Madison, Wisconsin. Up until 2004, he served as a consultant to the Educational Testing Service during the major redesign of the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language).

SEE ALSO: Assessment of Speaking; Context in the Analysis of Discourse and Interaction; Discourse Analysis in Language Assessment; Variability in a Dynamic Systems Theory Approach to Second Language Acquisition

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Suggested Readings

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