

Research Project

VARIATE 2|3

A Study into the Potential of Variation Theory in EFL Teaching and Learning at Secondary and Tertiary Level

TIMEFRAME

October 2015 – September 2018

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Harald Spann
University College of Education Upper Austria
Institute of Secondary School Education
Department of English

Kaplanhofstrasse 40
A-4020 Linz / Austria
<http://pro.ph-ooe.at/harald-spann>
phone: +43 - (0)732 - 7470 - 7022
email: harald.spann@ph-ooe.at

RESEARCHERS

Erwin M. Gierlinger	<i>Variation Theory</i> and SLA contexts
Harald Spann	<i>Variation Theory</i> and foreign language teaching and learning at tertiary level <i>Variation Theory</i> and the teaching of English-language literature
Thomas Wagner	<i>Variation Theory</i> and competence-oriented teaching in English at secondary level

PROJECT OUTLINE

VARIATE 2|3 explores the didactic potential of *Variation Theory* (VT) with regard to foreign language teaching and learning (English) at secondary and tertiary level. VT constitutes the theoretical foundation of *Learning Study*, a model that is rooted in the tradition of action research based teacher education (Lo, 2012; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). *Lesson Studies* and *Learning Studies* can be seen as a modern approach to collective planning and evaluation of classroom teaching, and it is currently discussed and promoted as an explanatory framework for the efficacy in professional teacher education and pedagogical design.

VT is based on the view that there is a profound variation in human perception and comprehension. As a consequence, teachers are expected to take this interpersonal variation into account when didactically analysing the so-called *object of learning* (Lo, 2012) for teaching. This is a dialogical process in which teachers, learners, and researchers identify critical aspects, thereby generating a deeper understanding of the *object of learning*.

A cursory inspection of the pertinent literature with regard to VT in the field of English foreign language (EFL) teaching and learning (Lo, 2012; Holmqvist & Mattisson, 2008; Tong, 2012) reveals the following issues for further research. First, the interface between VT and second language acquisition (SLA) appears to be neglected and thus in need of theoretical underpinning. Second, and as a consequence of this lack of theoretical foundation, a more elaborate definition of the *object of learning*, the most central concept of *Learning Study*, needs to be developed. Third, the term variation as such seems to be too vague for its

application in practical EFL teaching and learning contexts. And finally, current research methodology and the analytical tools used within the field of *Learning Study* need to be refined.

Against the background of the above-mentioned issues, VARIATE 2|3 focusses on a number of re-search questions, which can be categorised as follows:

- The potential of *VT* for competence-oriented EFL teaching and learning at secondary level
- The potential of *VT* in the context of SLA
- The potential of *VT* for EFL teaching and learning at tertiary level
- The potential of *VT* for the teaching of English-language literature (literature in education) in EFL contexts

These four areas are at the centre of the current research project, which will be divided into 2 stages: The aim of *stage 1*, the theoretical-hermeneutic stage, is both the exploration of *VT*'s potential and its constraints, as well as the investigation of possible redundancies and overlaps with theories and concepts in SLA. In addition to that, this stage is also concerned with the question in how far elements of *VT* are already incorporated in English at secondary level, and to what extent they might have an impact on the learners' foreign language proficiency. Provided that stage 1 yields sufficient evidence for *VT*'s potential that would justify further empirical investigations, stage 2 centres on the following three steps of implementing *VT*-based *Learning Study* projects:

1. Developing and testing innovative *Learning Study* projects in EFL at secondary level by means of attested quasi-experimental designs.
2. Implementation of *Learning Study* projects within the students' pre-service school practicum at the University College of Education Upper Austria.
3. Establishing *VT* as a didactic framework for tertiary students to organise and reflect on their lesson planning as part of the new Austrian curriculum in secondary teacher education.

PARTNERS

	institutions	collaborators	expertise
1.	University College of Education Upper Austria	H. Spann E. Gierlinger T. Wagner	project management, EFL teaching and learning, literature in education, data pool, data analysis
2.	The Private University College of Education of the Diocese of Linz*	G. Keplinger	EFL teaching and learning
3.	Johannes Kepler University Linz*	I. Born-Lechleitner	EFL teaching and learning
4.	Alpen-Adria-University Klagenfurt*	P. Posch	action research & <i>Lesson and Learning Study</i>
5.	University of Vienna*	C. Dalton-Puffer	second language acquisition

*possible project partners

METHODOLOGY

VARIATE 2|3 employs a mixed method design, combining both hermeneutic and empirical (quantitative and qualitative) research approaches. Stage 1 uses hermeneutic procedures in order to theoretically underpin the empirical research of stage 2. In stage 2, quasi-experimental and grounded research designs are developed and evaluated. This includes operationalising empirically accessible constructs in order to tap into pre-post effects. In addition to that, *VT*'s relevance for the teaching of English-language literature in EFL contexts will be investigated by means of classroom observations through qualitative data collection tools. Finally, the implementation of *Learning Study* at Austrian schools is accompanied by a mixed method research design.

TIMEFRAME

stage	objectives and measures	year
stage 1	– Inspecting pertinent literature on <i>Learning Studies</i> and <i>Variation Theory</i>	2015 – 2017
	– Approaching national and international collaborators	
	– Identifying VT elements in Austrian EFL teaching and learning at secondary level	
	– Developing a <i>Learning Study</i> project plan (<i>LSPP</i>) with national and international collaborators	
stage 2	– Developing and testing innovative <i>Learning Study</i> projects in EFL teaching and learning at secondary level by means of attested quasi-experimental and grounded designs	2017 – 2018
	– Data collection	
	– Data analysis	
	– Implementing <i>Learning Study</i> projects at tertiary institutions	
	– Establishing VT as a didactic framework for students to organise and reflect on their lesson planning as part of the new Austrian curriculum in secondary teacher education.	
	– Designing follow-up projects	

LITERATURE

- Holmqvist, M. & J. Mattisson (2008). Variation theory: A tool to analyse and develop learning at school. *Problems of Education in the 21st Century*, 7, 31-38.
- Lo, M. L. (2012). *Variation theory and the improvement of teaching and learning*. Gothenburg studies in educational sciences 323. Göteborgs Universitet.
- Stigler, J. W. & J. Hiebert (1999). *The teaching gap: best ideas from the world's teachers for improving education in the classroom*. New York: The Free Press.
- Tong, S. A. (2012). Applying the theory of variation in teaching reading. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 37 (10), [<http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2012v37n10.3>]