The Goal of Modern Language Instruction

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Thursday, April 4th, 6:00 – 7:00pm (reception to follow)
Location: Connan Room, CMU University Center, 1st Floor

What should be the goal of studying a modern language? It has long been acknowledged that native-like performance is not a realistic outcome of language instruction, certainly not for the majority of learners. Even if it were, the very definition of what native speaker performance is problematic (Davies 2003). Furthermore, there is the political question of whether a monolingual native speaker should be the model for second language learning (Ortega 2005). Besides these objections, there is the matter of the nature of language itself. In this presentation, I will make the case for the non-telic nature of language. I will propose that language is a complex adaptive system (Ellis and Larsen-Freeman 2009), with no endpoint (Larsen-Freeman 2005). Further, I will suggest that the view that language users are mere hosts of the language (Kroskrity 2004) they are learning is inaccurate, and denies their agency. I recognize, however, that teaching is essentially a normative process. I will conclude the presentation with some preliminary thoughts on how to reconcile the normativity of teaching with a non-telic view of language.

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Diane Larsen-Freeman is Professor of Education, Professor of Linguistics, and Research Scientist at the English Language Institute at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She is a Faculty Associate of the Center for Study of Complex Systems, University of Michigan. She is also a Distinguished Senior Faculty Fellow at the Graduate SIT Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont. In winter terms 2012 and 2013, Dr. Larsen-Freeman has been a Visiting Professor in the Department of Educational Linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania.

Dr. Larsen-Freeman has been a frequent conference speaker and has published extensively. Some of the books she has written are: The Grammar Book: An ESL/EFL Teacher’s Course (co-authored with Marianne Celce-Murcia, Heinle/Cengage, 1983; 1999; forthcoming), Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching (Oxford University Press, 1986; 2000; in 2011 with Marti Anderson), Grammar Dimensions: Form, Meaning, and Use (Series Director, Heinle/Cengage, 1993; 1997; 2000; 2007), Teaching Language: From Grammar to Grammaring (Heinle/Cengage, 2003), and Complex Systems and Applied Linguistics (co-authored with Lynne Cameron, Oxford University Press, 2008). Complex Systems and Applied Linguistics received the 2009 Kenneth W. Mildenberger prize from the Modern Language Association. Also in 2009, the Hellenic American University conferred on Dr. Larsen-Freeman an honorary Doctoral Degree in Humanities. Dr. Larsen-Freeman was awarded a Fulbright Distinguished Chair at the University of Innsbruck in 2010 and the American Association for Applied Linguistics’ Distinguished Scholarship and Service Award in 2011.