

Book Reviews

Key Topics in Second Language Acquisition

Editors:

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Good textbooks dealing with issues involved in second language acquisition (SLA) are always in high demand among undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate students as well as their teachers, and yet, even though numerous titles are available on the market, publications of this kind are exceedingly difficult to come by. The most conspicuous shortcomings are typically related, among others things, to the abstruse level of discussion of the topics chosen, much too often grounded in theoretical positions to which the authors seem to have sworn allegiance, the use of technical language that may be hard to access for many less experienced readers, the desire to cover too much territory, the frequent failure to reconcile theory and practice, and even when such reconciliation is undertaken, the blatant inapplicability of the pedagogical proposals offered to many instructional contexts. The book authored by Vivian Cook and David Singleton without doubt avoids all of these pitfalls, thus constituting a prime example of a well-written introduction to the undoubtedly highly complex, interdisciplinary and multifaceted domain of second language acquisition

research, being at the same time accessible, readable and simply engaging. As the two scholars explain at the very outset, “the book is not . . . a comprehensive introduction to SLA research, of which there are many around, but a glimpse into how SLA researchers have tried to answer eight common questions about second language acquisition” (p. xi). The eight topics they zoom in upon include the connections between various languages in the mind of the learner, the age factor in second language learning, the acquisition of vocabulary, the contribution of grammar to learning and using a second language, issues involved in the development of writing skills in a second language, the role of attitudes and motivation in learning second and foreign languages, the usefulness of the findings of SLA research for language pedagogy, and, finally, the goals of language instruction. The authors admit that the selection of these eight themes is to a certain extent arbitrary in the sense that it was dictated by the questions they have frequently been asked, their own research interests and experience, and the desire to address issues that would be of importance irrespective of a particular context. Thus, in their own words, “the final choice was a combination of popularity, expertise and relevance” (p. xi).

The eight topics are explored in separate chapters, each written by one of the authors but then commented upon and edited by the other, with the effect that, on the one hand, they allow the manifestation of personal beliefs and preferences as well as showing differences in terms of style, and, on the other, they draw upon the considerable expertise, experience and wisdom of both of the eminent scholars. All the chapters have a similar structure, they are divided into subsections devoted to different facets of the key theme in question, and they are meant to be used in any sequence, independently of each other. The issues under discussion are in most cases illustrated by means of easy-to-understand examples, taken from everyday life as well as the huge experience of the authors, and, importantly, basing upon a wide array of languages. The main points are usually conveniently highlighted in boxes or figures (e.g., different views on access to Universal Grammar in late learners on p. 27 in Chapter Two, on the age factor and distinctive features of foreigner talk on p. 43 in Chapter Three, dealing with the acquisition of words, or the sequences of second language acquisition on p. 64 in Chapter Four, devoted to learning grammar). Each section is accompanied by useful summaries of the key points discussed, many chapters end with concluding remarks which are intended to reiterate some of the main ideas and shed light on the possible directions for future research, and those interested are always provided with suggestions for further reading which can help them gain more in-depth grasp of a particular theme. In addition, the chapters are meant to be interactive since readers are requested to reflect upon their own experiences or perform simple tasks that enhance their understanding of the concepts being introduced (e.g.,

determining motivational orientation on p. 96 in Chapter Six, concerned with the role of attitudes and motivation, or deciding on reasons for language learning on p. 126 in Chapter Eight, on the goals of foreign language instruction). Attached at the end of the book is a glossary of the key topics featuring in the successive chapters.

As I already made clear at the very outset, the book is a valuable addition to the existing literature as far as introductory texts on second language acquisition are concerned and in fact it has a number of features which make it special. In the first place, Vivian Cook and David Singleton should be commended for the selection of topics to be covered, as they indeed represent hotly debated and sometimes blatantly misunderstood issues of great relevance to SLA. Equally commendable is the decision to opt for selectivity rather than comprehensiveness, because, thanks to this, the book can be successfully used in programs that are not entirely focused on SLA and with students who are only beginning to get acquainted with this domain and might be overwhelmed by detailed treatment of a multitude of diverse issues. In addition, the authors do not hesitate to dispel a number of deeply-seated, yet at times totally unfounded, beliefs about SLA, such that have persevered for decades and may have even discouraged many an individual from attempting to learn a foreign language. By way of example, they argue that neither the maximal (i.e., passing for a native speaker) nor the minimal (i.e., just being able to get messages across effectively in an additional language) view of bilingualism is tenable, opting instead for a more convenient and sensible term *second language user* (Chapter One). They take the stance that when it comes to second language instruction, "an early start . . . does not seem to necessarily advantage the recipients. . . . given motivation and perseverance, good results in second language learning can in fact be achieved in any age" (p. 33; Chapter Two). They also make it plain that the acquisition of words benefits from adept combination of intentional and incidental approaches (Chapter Three), emphasize that grammar plays an important role in learning and using an additional language (Chapter Four), and point to the need to recognize the vital role of writing skills in view of the fast growth of online communication, highlighting the common difficulties in this respect (Chapter Five). Equally importantly, they acknowledge the limitations of research on motivation, pinning their hopes on the new directions it has taken, in particular the focus on its dynamic nature (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2012) and the role of possible selves (Dörnyei, 2009) (Chapter Six). They call for greater contributions of research to language teaching, cautioning at the same time that, for this to happen, such research would need to take greater heed of the realities of real classrooms, and that its results cannot provide a direct basis for a recipe for successful instruction (Chapter Seven). Finally, they go a long way to

convince the reader that the goal of learning should not be envisaged as attaining native-like proficiency in the target language as such a view is bound to lead to learners viewing themselves as failures. Besides, as they comment, “. . . the monolingual is just as defective. Monolinguals can't switch between languages; their awareness of language is poorer; their perceptions of the world are less complex; their command of their first language is worse” (p. 137; Chapter Eight). On a more general level, Cook and Singleton express the view that SLA research should be brought closer to the everyday concerns of practitioners, and that researchers' agendas should be shaped to a greater extent by what transpires in the classroom, with the important caveat that under no circumstances can straightforward solutions and clear-cut pedagogic proposals be expected. Given that all of these pronouncements come from two of the most prominent scholars in the field and the entire text bespeaks their experience, sagacity and thoughtfulness, there is a clear need for such opinions to weigh heavily on how second languages are learnt and taught, and on how these two processes should be investigated. There are also many other, more down-to-earth, reasons why the book can be considered as one of the best introductory texts to research on SLA, the most important of which are related to the ease with which it can be processed, the presence of hundreds of enlightening and thought-provoking examples, as well as numerous attempts to get the reader engaged and to encourage reflection on his or her own experiences.

Obviously, it is always possible to find some fault with any publication and *Key Topics in Second Language Acquisition* is certainly no exception. One potential area of criticism could be the choice of topics, which may not be to the liking of scholars whose interests lie primarily with other aspects of SLA. I could lament, for example, the absence of a separate chapter devoted to language learning strategies, classroom interaction or corrective feedback; others could object to the inclusion of a chapter on writing even though nothing is said about reading, speaking and listening; and others yet could make the point that at least some space should be reserved for aptitude, working memory or intelligence. Another line of attack could be the theoretical stances adopted in the discussion of the eight topics or the conclusions reached, because it is obvious, for instance, that the views on the exact nature of bilingualism are bound to differ, some scholars are more convinced of the decisive role of the age factor than others, and the goals of language instruction are open to debate, depending on national policies, cultural milieus or simply perceptions of individual teachers and learners. A point could also be made that some of the tasks, particularly those involving the use of many different languages, may not be suitable for some readers who will be forced to offer answers based on hunches rather than real knowledge. The simple truth is, however, that the selection of

themes to be discussed is bound to be controversial and driven by a number of factors; as the authors candidly admit in the introduction, the specific approach has to be reflective of one's preferences, experiences and interpretations, and some hands-on activities are always more or less suitable, depending on the specific national and institutional context, the nature of a given program or simply a particular learner group. While such issues must surely be taken into account, they do not in the least affect the overall quality of Cook and Singleton's, book which seems to be a perfect choice for students who are just about to start exploring the fascinating but exceedingly complex world of SLA. In the epilogue, in fact in the closing sentence in the volume, the authors write: "SLA research, if it does nothing else, asks the right questions; and our little book, if it does nothing else, may give some useful guidance as to what some of those questions are" (p. 144). I am confident, though, that it does much more than that because even though the answers to the questions posed cannot possibly be definitive, they are carefully considered and grounded in the immense expertise of the two scholars. In effect, the volume may turn out to be a genuine eye-opener not only for learners, teachers, undergraduate or graduate students as well as methodology instructors, but also for researchers themselves who may wish to give a second thought to what issues should be given priority on their agendas, how these issues should most profitably be investigated, how the outcomes of their efforts can be made more accessible to practitioners, and how they can contribute to more effective teaching and learning.

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