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The Importance of Second Language Learning and Teaching in the Twenty First century

Second language learning and teaching are more important in the twenty-first century than ever before and are more important than even many language teachers appreciate. Most of us are familiar with traditional student populations: captive school children required to “pass” a foreign language (often for no obvious reason), college students satisfying a language requirement or working toward a BA in literature, young adults headed overseas for university courses, as missionaries or to serve as volunteers in the Peace Corps and similar organizations, and adults needing a L2 for vocational training or occupational purposes in the business world, aid organizations, the military, federal and state government, or the diplomatic and intelligence services. Typically, these students are literate, well educated, relatively affluent, learning a major world language, and, the school children aside, doing so voluntarily.

Less visible to many of us, but often with even more urgent linguistic needs, are the steadily increasing numbers of involuntary language learners of all ages. Each year, millions of people are forced to cross linguistic borders to escape wars, despotic regimes, disease, drought, famine, religious persecution, ethnic cleansing, abject poverty, and climate change. Many of these learners are poor, illiterate, uneducated, and faced with acquiring less powerful, often unwritten, rarely taught languages. In some instances, for

example, migrant workers in Western Europe, the United States, and parts of the Arab world, the target language is an economically and politically powerful one, such as French, Spanish, German, English, or Arabic. Instruction is available for those with money and time to pursue it, but many such learners lack either. Worse, marginalized and living in a linguistic ghetto, they frequently have little or no access to target language speakers, interaction with whom could serve as the basis for naturalistic second language acquisition (SLA). In some cases, involuntary learners are not created by people moving into new linguistic zones but by powerful languages coming to them. When imperialist nation states use military force to annex territory, they typically oblige the inhabitants to learn the language of the occupier if they hope to have access to education, economic opportunity, or political power, often while relegating local languages to second-class status or even making their use illegal.

The overall picture is unlikely to change anytime soon. Advanced proficiency in a foreign or second language will remain a critical factor in determining the educational and economic life chances of all these groups, from college students and middle-class professionals, through humanitarian aid workers and government and military personnel, to migrant workers, their school-age children, and the victims of occupations and colonization. Moreover, if the obvious utilitarian reasons were not important enough, for millions of learners, especially the non-volunteers, acquiring a new language is inextricably bound up with creating a new identity and acculturating into the receiving community. Occasionally, SLA is a path to resistance for them (“Know thine enemy’s language”), but in all too many cases, it is simply necessary for survival. For all these reasons, and given the obvious political implications of a few major world languages being taught to speakers of so many less powerful ones, a responsible course of action, it seems to me, as with education in general, is to make sure that language teaching (LT) and learning are as socially progressive

as possible. LT alone will never compensate for the ills that create so many language learners, but at the very least, it should strive not to make matters worse.

It is clear from the above examples – just a few of many possible – that the scope of second and foreign language learning and teaching in the twenty-first century is expanding and likely to continue to do so, and as varied as it is vast. Given the importance of language learning for so many people and so many different kinds of people, therefore, it would be reassuring to know that LT is being carried out efficiently by trained professionals and that language teachers and learners alike are satisfied with the end product. In fact, there is little evidence for either supposition. While individual programs are professionally staffed and producing good results, they are the exception. Around the world, people continue to learn languages in many ways, sometimes, it appears, with the help of instruction, sometimes without it, sometimes despite it, but there are many more beginners than finishers.

Against this backdrop, it seems reasonable to suggest that new proposals for LT should strive to meet some minimum criteria, with the justification for any serious approach needing to be multi-faceted. Since language learning is the process LT is designed to facilitate, an essential part of the rationale must surely be psycholinguistic plausibility, or consistency with theory and research findings about how people learn and use second and foreign languages. But that is by no means the only motivation required. Given that the subject is language education, a solid basis in the philosophy of education should be expected too. Also of major importance are accountability, relevance, avoidance of known problems with existing approaches, learner-centeredness, and functionality.

An approach to LT should be psycholinguistically plausible. This means that it should rely on learning mechanisms and processes shown to be available to learners of a given age while at the same time recognizing any known constraints on their learning capacity. The tacitly assumed theoretical underpinnings of all synthetic approaches to LT Skill-building

theories hold that only younger learners, and in some cases, only children younger than seven, can learn a language incidentally, that is, without intending to do so and without awareness of doing so. When it comes to LT for older children and adults (usually envisaged as in the mid-teens and thereafter), therefore, they accord dominant status to explicit learning and explicit instruction. The claim is that language learning is like learning any other complex cognitive skill. Declarative knowledge (knowledge that a language works this or that way) is changed through controlled practice into procedural knowledge (knowledge how), after which the procedural knowledge is gradually automatized through massive practice, the speed-up process reflecting the power law of learning. Automatization is necessary, as skill builders acknowledge that real-time communicative language use depends on a listener's or speaker's ability to access linguistic knowledge far too rapidly to permit conscious retrieval of declarative knowledge from long-term memory. Rightly or wrongly, such approaches are sometimes referred to as being based upon the strong-interface position, which holds that what starts as explicit knowledge "becomes" implicit through practice, or else becomes automatized to such a degree that it becomes accessible sufficiently rapidly to appear to have become implicit, even though that is not the case.

As with any theory, the embryonic cognitive-interactionist theory goes beyond the data in hand, so may eventually turn out to be wrong, wholly or in part, thereby undermining the validity of parts of TBLT. That is the nature of theories, which by definition go beyond the facts in an attempt to fill in the gaps in our knowledge and, more importantly, seek to explain the facts we think have been established. Meanwhile, however, unlike LT approaches and "methods" with no theoretical or research basis, including so-called eclectic methods (an oxymoron), TBLT is a coherent approach and, because it is grounded in a theory and in research findings in SLA, has at least a chance of being correct.

Reference

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