

REVIEWS

Usó-Juan, Esther and Alicia Martínez-Flor: CURRENT TRENDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT AND TEACHING OF THE FOUR LANGUAGE SKILLS. Mouton de Gruyter, 2006.

This volume is, up to the present time, the only contribution in Mouton de Gruyter's Series *Studies on Language Acquisition* which examines second language acquisition in relation to instructional practices. Rather than empirical reliability, Esther Usó-Juan and Alicia Martínez-Flor's edited volume offers a high level of theoretical insight prompted by the contributing authors' belief in the positive influence of the four-language-skills approach to the development of second/foreign language (L2) communicatively competent learners. Almost a decade afterwards, this work comes to further support William Grabe's (1998) foreword statements underlying the *raison d'être* for his *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* edited volume: 'the four skills framework has never really gone away, and it is still an underlying assumption driving many current discussions and curriculum planning, whether for good or for bad' (Grabe 1998: vii). In an attempt to update the research on the teaching of the four language skills and bridge the gap between common classroom practices and research perspectives, this particular work upgrades the validity of such a framework from varying and interrelated perspectives.

The 21 chapters making up the five sections of the whole volume are symmetrically and reader-friendly structured. Every section is initiated by a set of *pre-reading questions* aiming to encourage interest and raise awareness on a particular skill, and concluded by several suggested activities which enhance the practical possibilities each chapter entertains. Section I consists of the editors' introductory chapter. It offers an enlightening survey of the background to communicative competence-based approaches for the development of the four language skills. It depicts a framework of communicative competence which, based on the theoretical models previously reviewed, integrates the four skills in view of successful classroom practices and communicative ability development.

Section II includes five papers dedicated to *listening*. First, Alicia Martínez-Flor and Esther Usó-Juan review the changes that have occurred over the past decade and take into consideration discourse, linguistic, pragmatic, intercultural, and strategic competences to integrate listening instruction within a communicative competence framework. In the second chapter, Michael Rost identifies four research areas of particular relevance to L2 listening instruction—each one integrates other sub-areas which offer equally important insights for research. By commenting upon materials, learning strategies, and underlying principles to listening comprehension courses,

among other issues, David J. Mendelsohn advocates an approach to teaching listening comprehension through strategy instruction and authentic listening. Tony Lynch fills a gap in research by dealing with the implementation of skills in academic listening and illustrates, through updated activities from previous works, a hybrid instruction model which brings top-down and bottom-up approaches together. To round up this section, Goodith White regrets the minor role played by this skill in L2 classrooms, and, by providing illustrative examples, claims a more prominent position for *listening* in today's methodological approaches.

Section III brings together five papers centred on the skill of *speaking*. Alicia Martínez-Flor, Esther Usó-Juan, and Eva Alcón-Soler open the section by updating speaking instruction trends and discussing their communicative framework with regard to this skill. In the second paper, Martin Bygate focuses on the idea of *discursive repetition* as it relates to four areas of research which influence and encourage speaking instruction in L2 classrooms. Next, Christiane Dalton-Puffer analyses the role of questions as an effective instruction strategy and claims that in content-and-language-integrated classrooms learners have a space for developing their speaking skills by asking some types of questions more frequently than others. Rebecca Hughes' chapter shows that speaking skills are improved by learning-to-turn-take awareness, and that, rather than language proficiency, a varied range of factors exerts a greater influence on learners when taking turns in speech. Anne Burns closes the section by disagreeing with discourse-based approaches: if learners are exposed to classroom tasks and activities based on the notion of *text* they will develop their speaking skills more successfully.

The first chapter in Section IV opens, in line with the other sections, with the editors' general introduction to the skill concerned, *reading*, as it relates to the communicative competence framework discussed in Section I. In the second chapter, William Grabe explores the nature of reading and highlights a set of implications that has emerged from the research literature. He advocates the collaborative influence of both practitioner knowledge and persuasive research. In the third chapter of this section Anne M. Ediger fosters effective reading strategy instruction through purposeful reading to develop competent reading learners, and suggests a set of actions for classroom implementation. Next, Mary Lee Field discusses how to prepare individuals to carry out reading tasks when studying in English universities or working in English language occupational situations, and describes the programme elements for attaining reading fluency. Lastly, Eddie Williams' paper goes beyond the psycholinguistically-oriented perspective to take into consideration literacy as social practice and asserts that the social patterns and values attached to reading activities allow for instructional practices oriented to communicative competence.

The remaining five contributions in the book (Section V) are all related to *writing*. Esther Usó-Juan, Alicia Martínez-Flor, and Juan Carlos Palmer-Silveira summarize language learning theory in relation to writing

and explore the teaching of this skill from a communicative perspective that promotes more efficient writing teachers and learners. Ann M. Johns selects in her paper several researchable topics which are to become an integral part of teacher education and academic literacy study in forthcoming years, and also examines their potential influence on L2 writing teachers and learners. Barbara Kroll proposes and discusses *the life cycle of the writing class* as an effective educational strategy for approaching the task of creating assignments and attaining more efficient writing courses. In the next chapter, Christopher Tribble shakes consolidated practices and stakes out the value of professional expertise (over that of *nativeness*) as a more correct and realistic criterion for standard reference in writing instruction. Alister Cumming's chapter closes the section and the whole book. With arguments based on the complexity that characterizes writing, he develops a framework for describing learning goals in view of the improvement of L2 writing.

The volume reviewed here may be regarded as a sturdy, well-balanced and illuminating publication in which individual papers do not vary significantly in their degree of focus or depth of analysis and discussion. The editors are to be praised for their active involvement in the book. This has resulted in five chapters which set the context and lay the foundations for a clearer understanding of the individual studies. The editors are also to be praised for bringing together what is undeniably an interesting set of scholarly papers written by a select group of authors. Indeed, Esther Usó-Juan and Alicia Martínez-Flor have compiled a stimulating book which enhances educational research in many ways. The book not only addresses current issues and trends in teaching practice but also elaborates on innovative activities and exemplary research.

There are, however, a few shortcomings. Following common practice in literature on L2 methodology, unfortunately, this book does not address the study of assessment practices in relation to the four skills framework. What kind of assessment practices fits within the proposed framework of communicative competence, and how, and to what extent, may these contribute to the development of the four language skills? Information technologies and how they relate to the teaching of the four skills is also a left-behind issue. Today, many schools and colleges are equipped with computerized classrooms and/or self-access centres which, when in use, require specific methodological strategies. Finally, the place of the four skills within the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages as well as within the European space for higher education is only slightly touched upon by just one paper (Goodith White's chapter on listening). As we are witnessing significant changes in the editors' and most contributing authors' educational systems, a discussion, however brief, of the European guidelines for the mastery of the language skills would have been a timely inclusion.

There are also a few details of presentation. The recurrent order of topics would have allowed for a less traditional, although perhaps more bizarre,

organization of chapters in which language skills are not, as usual, segregated. Moreover, it would serve to emphasize the editors' point that: 'whenever possible, they [the four language skills] should be integrated as happens in actual language use'. The suggested activities rounding out each chapter could have been presented in a more organized form, taking into account target readers and contexts of implementation more specifically. Also, a more detailed index, or even a glossary of relevant terms, would have contributed to highlighting the wide range of aspects covered and constructs discussed.

Neither these suggestions nor these criticisms (many of which will certainly be due to editorial constraints) detract in any serious sense from the value of this book. Indeed, Esther Usó-Juan and Alicia Martínez-Flor have put forth a relevant and highly readable study of pedagogical issues within the four-language-skills approach to teaching as well as a comprehensive survey of current research and applications. I strongly recommend it to experienced L2 teachers in general, practising skills teachers in particular, and researching teachers as a model of how the four-language-skills approach relates to current L2 instruction and how it may be investigated.

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REFERENCES

- Grabe, W. (ed.) 1998. 'Foreword,' *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 18: vii–xi.

J. P. Lantolf and S. L. Thorne: **SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY AND THE GENESIS OF SECOND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT.**
Oxford University Press, 2006.

Since Firth and Wagner's (1997) seminal article which called for a social turn in SLA, there has been a proliferation of SLA research that has embraced sociocultural perspectives. Admittedly, such perspectives had been around even before the so-called Firth and Wagner debate, with Zuengler and Miller (2006) identifying five such perspectives in their position paper on SLA theory. One key perspective has been Vygotskian sociocultural theory (SCT). In fact, SCT guides this book. It seeks 'to describe the history and continuing development of Vygotsky-inspired research and its application to second- and foreign-language developmental processes and pedagogies' (p. 1).