
REVIEWS

Heidi Byrnes, ed. *Learning Foreign and Second Languages: Perspectives in Research and Scholarship*. Teaching Languages, Literatures, and Cultures. Vol. I. New York: MLA, 1998. 322p.

CHRISTINE ANTON
BERRY COLLEGE

Learning Foreign and Second Languages: Perspectives in Research and Scholarship is the first volume in a series on Teaching Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, published under the auspices of the Modern Language Association of America. The series is intended specifically for secondary and post-secondary language instructors, and aims to reach specialists and non-specialists alike. The collection, consisting of twelve contributions by eleven authors, is the result of recent changes in the field of second language acquisition research. The essays are thus grouped around the various aspects of second and foreign language learning, its theory, methodology, and its practical application.

Heidi Byrnes' book, which purports to introduce "a highly specialized field — the vibrant field of second language acquisition research (SLA) — to a nonspecialized audience" (1) tries to accomplish two goals: to offer an instructive overview of current trends in second language acquisition, and to point out the potential future pedagogical implications for foreign language departments in America.

The collection of twelve essays presents a variety of topics and provides a good survey and introduction of various approaches to the multiple relations between second language acquisition theory and practice. The first two articles discuss the context of language learning research and the teaching of foreign languages in the United States. While Claire Kramsch emphasizes the relation between SLA and the present intellectual outline of language, literature, and culture studies, Elizabeth Bernhardt examines sociohistorical perspectives on language teaching from the earliest days in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the modern streams in the language teaching profession. The second two articles present theoretical and methodological thoughts in second language acquisition research. Thom Huebner's essay explores the contributions of linguistic theories on language to SLA research. In a selective overview, Huebner provides examples from theories of register and discourse analyses, universal grammar, speech acts, and variation.

Even though the link between linguistics and second language acquisition has traditionally been very close, “it is still difficult to find theoretical linguists who draw on SLA data for theory construction” (69). However, Huebner states, as the development of second language acquisition research is rapidly growing, the connection will eventually become more reciprocal. Written in a rather technical and at times inaccessible style, Kathleen Bailey’s article investigates three different approaches to empirical research in foreign language teaching and learning: experimental research, naturalistic inquiry, and action research. Bailey discusses the varied underlying philosophies, goals, and uses of each approach and lays out their separate advantages and disadvantages, followed by a list of references and suggestions for further reading. As no approach is considered to be superior to the others, the researcher will have to determine which approach best suits his or her individual research study. Important differences among these three approaches are selection of variables, data structuring, the researcher’s control over the selected variables, and the extent of intentional interference by the researcher.

The next four entries in Byrnes’ book take a closer look at the role of second and foreign language learners and the learning process itself. Bill VanPatten focuses on universal aspects of second language acquisition, particularly the order of acquisitions, the developmental sequences, and their cognitive constraints. The essay argues that second language learners do not create novel and individually distinctive language patterns, but rather follow common processes and mechanisms in language acquisition. As language learners proceed from input processing to developing linguistic systems to creating final output, several universal principles are at play. VanPatten sets forth a series of hypotheses as for example: (1) “Learners process input for meaning before they process it for form”; (2) “Learners process content words in the input before anything else”; (3) “Learners prefer processing lexical items to grammatical items for semantic information” (114). VanPatten concludes by stressing that although researchers are far from completely understanding these complex mechanisms, it is nevertheless crucial that language instructors are familiar with these theories in order to recognize the limitations of certain teaching methodologies and strategies. In the next article on “Acquiring Competence in a Second Language,” Catherine Doughty carefully weighs the pro and cons of a grammar based language instruction versus the communicative language teaching approach. In light of the fact that both approaches appear to fall short in their attempts to facilitate targetlike accuracy, Doughty proposes an amalgamation of both methods to promote second and foreign language competence effectively. Within a similar framework as Doughty’s article, the next two essays investigate the benefits of communicative language teaching, primarily so-called

“social interactions” in the classroom setting of two broad types — teacher/learner and learner/learner interaction. Leo van Lier and Gabriele Kasper equally stress the point that social meaning facilitates language competence best when language instruction diverges from teacher-centered to more open student-centered classroom activities.

The volume’s last three studies relate to the application of SLA research to the role of technology in second and foreign language learning, the evaluation of learning outcomes in second language acquisition, and the construction of curricula in foreign language departments. Robert Blake gives an excellent overall assessment of the use of computer technology in language teaching combined with interesting and helpful suggestions of its practical utilization the classroom. Finally, how does one define, measure, and determine second and foreign language knowledge and proficiency? This is the question that Elana Shohamy tries to answer by presenting a multiplicity of language testing procedures designed for evaluating learning outcome. The last essay in this volume is by the editor herself. Heidi Byrnes concludes the book by encompassing the previous eleven contributions in her analysis of the potential implication of SLA research and its influence on future curricula in foreign language departments. By critically reviewing the current status quo of theory and practice of curricular thinking in the foreign language field, Byrnes proposes a thorough redesigning of curricular options. Faced with decreasing enrollment numbers, rigid budget constraints, as well as a tight academic job market, a reconstructing of foreign language programs in the United States is long overdue. As Byrnes states, “the scholarly basis and justification for a rigorously academic and educationally sound reorientation of foreign language programs are available. It remains for departments of foreign languages to seize the rich opportunities” (291).

Second language acquisition research is still widely considered to be a new and virtually unknown field that has yet to prove its significance for the learning and teaching of foreign languages and literatures. Indeed, almost all authors point to the difficulty in developing a common concept of the role and nature of second language acquisition research and its correlation to the practical aspects of teaching foreign languages. This book excellently serves to introduce SLA research and scholarship to a broad audience, and to familiarize even the casual reader with recent trends in the foreign language profession. The collection’s multiple perspectives cover a wide range of ground and offer a rich overview and sampler of the tremendous amount of work that has already been accomplished in SLA research. The only thing that is somewhat distracting about this book is the apparent lack of any logical order as to the arrangement of the separate studies. And while some

of the essays are somewhat jargon-filled, they do provide stimulating reading for researchers, teachers, and administrators alike. I would recommend the book to anyone in the profession interested in second and foreign language teaching and learning. ✨