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Reviews

Barry McLaughlin

Theories of Second-Language Learning. London: Edward Arnold, 1987. (184 pp.)

Professor McLaughlin is Chairman of the Psychology Board of Studies at the University of California and has several articles on theories and research in second language learning to his credit, as well as two recent publications: *Second-Language Acquisition in Childhood*, Volume I (1984) and Volume II (1985).

It is difficult to escape the impression that in the last 15-20 years there has been a plethora of publications concerned with the process of language learning. This no doubt reflects the universal need to learn a second language and the resultant need for second language teachers of both children and adults. Rod Ellis's contribution: *Understanding Second Language Acquisition* (1985) represents something of a milestone in this field, and any work that can measure up to its excellent standard, surely deserves recognition. Wolfgang Klein also supplied a broader overview in his *Second Language Acquisition* (1986). McLaughlin's approach is somewhat different, as he indicates in his preface:

"This book is about theory and the role of theory in research on *adult* second-language learning. My principal goal is to examine what position theory plays in this growing subfield of applied linguistics and to evaluate present theories. Particular attention is paid to methodological issues and to the question of how theoretical concepts are translated into empirical procedures." (p. vii)

In his introductory chapter, McLaughlin offers three assumptions which determine his approach:

1. Research is inseparable from theory.
2. There is no one scientific method.
3. There is no single scientific proof.

He sees the functions of theories as being three-fold:

"First, they allow us to understand and organize the data of experience. Theories summarize relatively large amounts of information via a relatively short list of propositions. Second, theories transform our thinking about phenomena and enable researchers to use empirical data to draw conclusions that are not evident from the data taken in isolation . . . Third, theories guide prediction and stimulate research." (p. 154)

Having separated theories into two types: deductive and inductive, he specifies four criteria for evaluating theory:

1. The theory must have definitional precision and explanatory power.
2. The theory must be consistent with what is currently known.
3. The theory must be heuristically rich in its predictions.
4. The theory must be falsifiable.

Having outlined these perspectives, McLaughlin proceeds to a description and a critical assessment of five theories, which he considers to be "in the mainstream of second-language research".

The first of these is Krashen's by now very familiar Monitor Model. The author regards it as "the most ambitious theory of the second-language learning process". His evaluation of it is particularly harsh but it is difficult to fault his reasoning. While giving Krashen credit for bringing together

research findings from different domains, he disagrees with his interpretation of these findings. His principal objections are that the acquisition-learning distinction is not clearly defined and it is impossible to determine which process is operating in a particular case. He finds the Monitor severely restricted in its application and the Natural Order Hypothesis a particularly weak one as it “postulates that some things are learned before others, but not always”. The Input Hypothesis he regards as untestable as “no definition is given of the key concept, ‘comprehensible input’”. He finds that there is no basis for relating the affective filter to individual differences in language learning and further faults Krashen for not defining his terms precisely and for his theory not being clear in its predictions. What has made Krashen’s ideas so attractive is that they are so readily accessible to practitioners, but this has unfortunately led to many teachers accepting his theories as Gospel, thus doing a disservice to the field of language learning.

Krashen’s theories are deductive: they attempt to provide a view of the ‘whole picture’ of second language learning, based on deductions from a small set of basic principles. Thus they invoke theoretical constructs that are remote from empirical data and only indirectly tied to observations. For this reason, too, they are wide open to criticism and ‘Krashen-bashin’ is in fashion. The remaining four theories McLaughlin considers are all of the inductive type – theories arising from empirical observation, building “low-level or intermediate-level constructs before jumping to conclusions about the larger picture”. They account only for phenomena where repeated observations show the same behavioural pattern.

The first of these theories is Interlanguage theory. After discussing its origins and characteristics, the author turns to recent developments and considers the following major issues:

1. How systematic and how variable is the interlanguage?
2. How are interlanguages acquired?
3. What is the role of the first language?

In his evaluation of this theory, he notes that it has had a relatively minor impact on pedagogy, as research has mainly been concerned with *describing* learners’ interlanguage systems. While early research produced premature generalizations, subsequent research has stayed closer to the data and is now focusing on the process of interlanguage development. If the theory has only been partially successful, it has made clear the inadequacies of a rigid behaviourist-structuralist approach and has brought about a transformation of thinking about a number of second language phenomena. Most important is that it has generated some “interesting and testable hypotheses” concerned with the “linguistic, sociolinguistic and psychological processes that underlie inter-language development”. It is to these three processes that McLaughlin devotes his next three chapters.

Linguistic universals are considered in Chapter 4. Two approaches are noted: the typological approach stresses the comparison between languages in its search for linguistic universals, “analysing data from a representative sample of the world’s languages in order to extract universal patternings” and describe possible variations. The problems are finding a sample that is truly representative of actual world languages, and demonstrating the empirical validity of putative linguistic universals. The second approach, proposed by Chomsky, assumes that the first language learner “comes to the acquisition task with innate, specifically linguistic knowledge, or Universal Grammar.” McLaughlin believes that both approaches hold a great deal of promise for clarifying our understanding of interlanguage development and transfer.

Chapter 5 deals with Acculturation/Pidginization theory, in which the emphasis has shifted to sociolinguistic and social psychological factors in the second language learning process. There appears to be a relationship between acculturation and degree of success in learning the target language. Acculturation is seen as an adaptational process requiring modification in attitudes, knowledge and behaviour. Part of the process involves learning the appropriate linguistic habits of the target language. Pidginization represents a fossilization in the acculturation process. But are the processes involved in pidgins and creoles similar to those that occur in second language learning? This

theory is concerned with why second language learners often fail to master the target language. It involves factors such as social distance, attitude towards the target language and motivation to learn. McLaughlin accepts that this theory has enriched second language research, but notes that it is not relevant to classroom second language learning, “where learners do not have contact with native speakers other than the teacher”. At present there is not enough information to validate or falsify the theory.

The author finally turns to Cognitive theory, which views second language learning as the acquisition of a complex cognitive skill and the automatization of component sub-skills. It stresses “the limited information-processing capacities of human learners, the use of various techniques to overcome these limitations” and the role of practice in routinizing component skills. While admitting his positive bias towards this theory, McLaughlin nevertheless notes a number of its limitations, e.g. the assumption that the acquisition of any complex cognitive skill parallels second language acquisition. Cognitive theory needs to be linked to theories of L2 acquisition, as on its own it cannot explain many of the linguistic constraints implied in other theories. Furthermore, it cannot make precise predictions for L2 learning, nor can its propositions be falsified. On the other hand, criticism is premature and “cognitive theory has been heuristically rich and deserves to be pursued”.

In a concluding chapter, the author briefly considers the role of theory in L2 research and discusses the influence of theory on the choice of research methods. He advocates an integrated approach to L2 teaching “that incorporates both the more creative aspects of language learning and the more cognitive aspects that are susceptible to guidance and training”.

It must be said that this is a most authoritative work which makes a major contribution to the field of second language learning. It succeeds admirably in stimulating critical thinking about the various theories discussed, as well as about the general nature and role of theory in L2 research. Although the author states in his preface that readers do not require an “extensive background” in this field, they do need to be reasonably well informed. This book has the virtue of being comprehensive and up to date, and while many of the issues raised in it are as yet unresolved, it certainly sharpens the reader’s awareness of just how varied, dynamic and controversial the field of second language learning is.

J.J. Swartz

Jack C. Richards and Theodore S. Rodgers

Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching: A description and analysis. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. (171 pp.)

When skimming through the list of contents in this publication, one inevitably recalls the earlier work of Robert Blair: *Innovative Approaches to Language Teaching* (Newbury House, 1982), for it appears to cover much the same ground. However, a closer perusal reveals several fundamental differences in organization, purpose and approach. Blair, as editor, allows the various advocates of the Silent Way, the Total Physical Response, Community Language Learning, the Natural Approach and Suggestopedia (approaches covered in both books) to write in support of methods they have designed or developed themselves. Further, in the earlier volume, these approaches are classified according to whether, for example, they apply to an acquisition or a learning environment. Blair then devotes the last section of this book to an integrated approach to language teaching: an eclectic use of the methods described in the earlier sections.

Richards (well-known for his work on error analysis in the mid-seventies) and Rodgers are not primarily concerned with an evaluation of the various approaches described in their book, nor do they recommend one method in preference to another. Acknowledging from the outset that different