

# New publications ... Nuwe publikasies

## Reviews

J. Charles Alderson & A.H. Urquhart (eds.)

*Reading in a foreign language*. London: Longman, 1984.

This is the most recent volume in the new *Applied Linguistics and Language Study* series—a series aimed at the language teacher and student who wishes to keep abreast of theoretical and descriptive inter-disciplinary positions based on the latest research findings. The editors of the series are concerned to encourage an empirical state of mind.

The title of this volume is perhaps misleading, as the editors do not draw a distinction between second language and foreign language learning. The term “foreign” is used to describe reading in a language other than one’s mother tongue, so the research discussed should be of direct interest to ESL teachers in South Africa. Indeed, much of the research reported is from studies of first language users, for the editors consider this important.

We do not, and indeed find it difficult to, draw a clear distinction between first and foreign language reading—in fact, it is not clear to what extent reading in a foreign language is different from reading in a first language.

Reading is a complex activity and the editors were determined not to attempt an overview that might well have led to banality. They decided to limit their discussion to reading for the purpose of formal learning.

The introduction explores the question, “What is reading?” The discussion is based on Halliday’s view that it is the meaning-making capacities of the language user which determine to what extent a text will have meaning. In that sense a text can never be said to have a precisely identifiable message.

In presenting their material, the editors practise

what they preach. First, they provide sufficient background information to ensure that the relevant knowledge necessary for comprehension will be activated in our minds. The three key elements—the reader, the text and the interaction between text and reader (the writer is left out of account for the purposes of volume)—are carefully defined.

The papers themselves are carefully chosen for their focus on evidence rather than speculation, and are generally characterized by lucidity and the provision of specific detail. This makes it possible for teachers to do, as Christopher Candlin asks, and consider

to what extent in their own reading teaching, and indeed, in their own reading experience, [the proffered] conclusions are warranted and [the suggested] changes in common and traditional pedagogy motivated.

A special feature of the book is that each paper is followed by a postscript written by the editors in which they critically review the most significant aspects raised, explore the pedagogical implications, and suggest lines of further research.

There are several significant implications for established teaching practice. The most important one is that reading manuals and exercises which emphasize convergence on “the right interpretation” fly in the face of evidence which increasingly establishes heterogeneity and divergence as characteristic of the reading process. Furthermore, there is little evidence for the separate existence of a hierarchy of subskills. Reading assignments, it seems, should involve varied reading activities, demanding and developing a variety of reading strategies.

A new role emerges for the teacher:

If we are to focus on the learner-reader’s attempts at meaning-making then teachers will necessarily become engaged in evaluating variable interpretations of the meanings to be made from texts. Furthermore, the link

established by research between products of reading and readers' purposes suggests a teaching role of advising, guiding and ultimately evaluating readers' goals and routes, and, most difficult of all for a pedagogy accustomed to assessment against common yardsticks, the acceptance of a variety of provisional interpretations.

In sum, teaching reading becomes itself an investigation.

With this in view, Candlin addresses three additional questions to "teachers as experimenters". First, he asks whether the social conditions of production and interpretation of the texts should not be taken into account in monitoring and exploring the learner's personal process of reading. Second, he suggests further investigation into the finding that recall does not equal comprehension or understanding. Third, he suggests that more should be done to make readers' accounts of the reading process "as rich and as warranted as possible".

There have been few books which have so advanced our understanding of the reading process and of the strategies which are employed in it. Teachers will find it of immediate practical value. So will researchers. It truly opens up the subject.

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**Robert W. Blair** (Editor-contributor)

*Innovative approaches to language teaching.* Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers, 1982. (Paperback, 257 pp.)

Robert Blair, an enthusiastic and experienced language teacher from Brigham Young University, introduces some of the more unconventional approaches to foreign and second language teaching in this book. The need to accelerate change in language teaching is evident and it also serves as an

encouragement to experiment with these alternative approaches. Blair does not compare the various methods, but he rather allows the originators of the methods to do the introduction themselves through carefully selected articles and papers by these people.

In the introduction, Blair emphasizes the need to improve on conventional approaches, as they just do not produce results. In his own words: "... we are left with the challenge of finding more efficient training methods that will accomplish more in less time." Blair has arranged the various contributions in a very interesting way, viz Part 1: Background, Part 2: The evolution of the comprehension approach, Part 3: Approaches to a rich acquisition environment, Part 4: Approaches to rich learning environment, Part 5: An integrated approach.

In Part 1, Blair reviews his own search for better and more effective methods (1950-1981). This becomes a historical overview of L2/L3 teaching, leading up to the methods introduced in this book which he has used and tested. The second section of Part 1 is a paper delivered by Krashen at Brigham Young University in 1979 in which he discusses his nine hypotheses of second language acquisition. This most interesting and stimulating view of second language acquisition forms a crucial backdrop for the other contributions in the book. The notion that conscious learning and analysis of the structure of a language should be subordinate to a natural, communicative acquisition in a rich and varied environment where the learner is exposed to the whole language, forms an important principle for most of the methods.

In Part 2, Palmer, Nida, Asher, Postovsky and Burling advocate the importance of delayed speech production with beginners. The work of Postovsky is particularly convincing, as it is supported by empirical evidence which clearly indicates that beginners who first listen to comprehensible input for an extended period of time, perform much better than learners who immediately start with the production of speech.

Some of the most interesting work is introduced in Part 3 where the emphasis is on rich input and the total person involved in a "dynamic social matrix" (p. 102). Newmark, Stevick, Curran, Lozanov, Terrell and Galyean have this one principle in