

# Reviews

*Teachers' Voices 7: Teaching Vocabulary*. Anne Burns & Helen de Silva Joyce (Eds.). Sydney, Australia: Macquarie University, 2001. 132 pp.

*Reviewed by*

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*Teachers' voices 7: Teaching vocabulary* is the seventh publication in a series of edited volumes reporting action research studies. The studies were conducted by teachers who are teaching English in Australia for the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) under the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research.

As the editors contend, many teachers would not argue against the importance of vocabulary instruction in language teaching practice. The research on vocabulary teaching and learning has begun to gain its fair share of attention recently, and this publication is timely in reflecting the growing interest in vocabulary research and instruction.

In the introduction, the editors provide background information on how the project on vocabulary teaching emerged, together with a brief overview of recent research and theory development on vocabulary acquisition and teaching. The overview summarises the complexity of the area of knowledge in a concise manner. This information also orients readers to the type of training the action researcher-teachers received before they undertook this project.

The main chapters of the book consist of four sections on vocabulary teaching: 1) different learner levels, 2) how to incorporate vocabulary instruction throughout the curriculum, 3) various teaching techniques, and 4) teaching idioms. Each section includes several action research studies conducted by a teacher-researcher. There are 19 such studies in total. The research themes include a wide range of topics, such as vocabulary development with a post-beginner class, a thematic approach to teaching vocabulary, the development of ESP vocabulary, the use of TV and dictionaries as learning tools, and exploring idiom usage.

Employing action research procedures, each study is guided by specific questions teachers formulated in teaching vocabulary in

their classrooms or programs. There is also a description on how and why each teacher was motivated to carry out action research. Every study provides detailed contextual information including class size, students' demographic information, such as nationality and educational background, as well as characteristics such as motivation and language level. The teachers describe their teaching techniques/lessons, written in a clear manner, in order to give readers a better understanding of the actual instruction. This description is followed by their evaluations and reflections. Evaluation methods include both objective (test scores, questionnaires) and subjective (teachers' impressions) measures.

The applications of the book are manifold. One use is as a practical resource book for teacher-researchers who are interested in carrying out their own action research. The large-scale, program-wide action research projects, as well as individual studies serve as a useful guide for researchers interested in different research scopes. Another use is as a resource book for vocabulary teaching. Studies in the book address various aspects of vocabulary teaching and adopt different approaches for a wide range of students. Some authors have included copy-ready materials for teacher use.

The editors argue that some of the teaching practices introduced in the book might not transfer seamlessly to other teaching contexts. From this perspective, some language teachers working in other contexts or with different types of learners might question the applicability of action research carried out with students in Australia. However, the depth of description of each teaching context and voices of the teachers provide readers with a detailed view of these teachers' teaching situations, how they evaluated their success, and how they might make improvements. For teachers, the information needed is not only about new teaching techniques, but also about reasons for implementing a certain task and its effectiveness. Then we can make our own professional judgment on how it might transfer to our own classrooms.

This echoes a recent movement in teacher research, which views the teacher as an active agent, rather than a mere transmitter of subject knowledge and teaching techniques. Studies on teacher development increasingly call for an ecological understanding of teaching and learning (Wideen, Mayer-Smith & Moon, 1998), and value reflective teaching as a means to further teaching expertise (Schön, 1983). After reading the detailed accounts of each specific context of the studies introduced in this book, readers will be better able to reflect, re-examine, and expand their own teaching of vocabulary.

## References

- Schön, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New York: Basic Books.
- Wideen, M., Mayer-Smith, J., & Moon, B. (1998). A critical analysis of the research on learning to teach: Making the case for an ecological perspective on inquiry. *Review of Educational Research*, 68, 130-178.

***Teaching and Researching Autonomy in Language Learning*. Phil Benson. Harlow, England: Longman, 2001. 260 pp**

*Reviewed by*

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Originating as a focus of attention more than three decades ago, autonomy in language learning has evolved from its conceptions to become part of the mainstream of language teaching methodology. In *Teaching and Researching Autonomy in Language Learning*, Phil Benson (2001) ties these formerly marginalized and disparate theories and practices into a cohesive map, an inviting formation where either browsing or serious contemplation are available options for the language researcher. Because of its clear, comprehensive coverage and introduction of up-to-date work, this text is most suitable for, though would not be exclusive to, readers entering the field. More advanced researchers would also benefit, as the text is a good summary which pulls together the field's diverse sources and influences.

Packaged into manageable sections and subsections, the themes are further punctuated by side-bar-type critical quotes, concepts, and titles for recommended reading. Although these expressive boxes often encumber the flow of the text's prose, they usefully highlight points for ready referencing and quick comprehension. A separate section in the back lists a variety of useful resources for research and practical use in classrooms, such as journals and newsletters, websites, and professional associations, including JALT's Learner Development Special Interest Group. All in all, this assortment is easily digestible and definitely inspiring.

The first section elaborates the history of autonomy's conceptual changes in political, psychological, and educational fields. Not afraid to assert himself, Benson maintains that in order to study autonomy as a subject, one must nail down slippery definitions and hold to an observable, measurable manifestation. By defining autonomy as "the capacity to take control of one's own learning" (p. 47), Benson claims that it becomes identifiable and measurable.

Apart from theoretical agendas, questions have been raised as to whether the promotion of autonomy inadvertently administers culturally inappropriate and insensitive values in the foreign language classroom. Originating in Europe, and discussed mainly in a European context, autonomy now steps into a wider framework as it spreads worldwide. Citing Aoki and Smith who assert that autonomy "is not an approach enforcing a particular way of learning," Benson concludes that it is "culturally legitimate" in that "autonomous learners are the most able to contribute to [their own] cultural development and transformation" (p. 57).

In the second section, Benson outlines and develops six different approaches which foster autonomy: resource-based, technology-based, learner-based, classroom-based, curriculum-based, and teacher-based approaches. Argument is made for the inherent efficacy and type of control emphasized in relation to each approach. This is not to say that one approach is superior to another, but that, naturally, an integration of approaches best relates to personal classroom practice. This section may be helpful for teachers, learners and researchers to identify their current methodologies, and may inform them of other potential practices.

In the last section, suggestions for future research are described, including details about current research and difficulties. One area needing further investigation is the correlation between the degree of autonomy and language proficiency level. Benson asserts that there is no hard evidence proving a direct correlation between the two, although greater autonomy has generally been considered to lead to greater proficiency in language learning itself.

Included in the research section are also summaries of six case studies conducted around the world. The most exciting one was done in Hong Kong by Shirley Yap who investigated her students' out-of-class language learning activities. While many of us may not have heard of any study on autonomous language learning outside the classroom, this original and thought-provoking work embarks upon an investigation into the true unknown, and, these reviewers hope, heralds a new research front.

The best part about Benson's book is that it is a lucid, easy read, drawing from a wide perspective and offering a solid history on its topic. The drawback would be that this format allows for little depth in the particulars as it quickly skips ahead to the next part. For the practitioner wishing to combine research with teaching, this book provides helpful references and jumping-off points. The seasoned expert, however, may choose to pass. Yet, as it is more of a map of the field, it may be refreshing for those who wish to get out of the trees and take a look at the forest.

*Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching (Second Edition).*

Jack C. Richards & Theodore S. Rodgers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. 270 pp.

*Reviewed by*

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TESOL educators face many issues when developing and putting into practice effective curricula and lessons. The issues not only concern WHAT to teach, but also HOW to teach. Richards and Rodgers, quoting Lange (1990, p. 253) point out that "foreign language teacher development...has a basic orientation to methods of teaching. Unfortunately, the latest bandwagon 'methodologies' come into prominence without much study or understanding, particularly those that are supported by a particular 'guru'" (p. 15).

It is with this in mind that the authors have updated their 1986 classic, reducing the space given to less mainstream methods and providing analyses of new approaches, methods, and developments in language teaching in the late twentieth century and into the new millennium. They attempt to give a balanced historical view of language teaching and the events and forces that have shaped it over the years.

The first part of the book, "Major Language Trends In Twentieth-Century Language Teaching," begins with an historical overview of language teaching from the seventeenth century up to the present. The authors believe that a study of past and present teaching methods is important for three reasons:

The study of approaches and methods provides teachers with a view of how the field of language teaching has evolved. Ap-

proaches and methods can be studied not as a prescription for how to teach but as a source of well-used practices, which teachers can adapt or implement based on their own needs. Experience in using different teaching approaches and methods can provide teachers with basic teaching skills that they can later add to or supplement as they develop teaching experience. (p.16)

Following this historical overview, the authors outline and describe in detail a model, which shows the three elements (approach, design, and methods) and sub-elements, which make up a method. Richards and Rodgers use their model throughout the rest of the book to analyze various methods that have come into vogue over the years. By doing this, they give the teaching professional examples of how the model can be used to evaluate any teaching method.

In the second part of the book, Richards and Rodgers examine various approaches that emerged after a major paradigm shift in language teaching towards a more communicative style of teaching and learning. These approaches either developed outside mainstream language teaching or represent an application of educational principles generated elsewhere. Total Physical Response, The Silent Way, and Counseling Learning are examples of the former, while Neurolinguistic Programming and Multiple Intelligences are examples of the latter.

In the final part, the writers focus on the approaches and methods of the communicative era, beginning in the late 1980s. These include Communicative Language Teaching, The Natural Approach, Content-Based Teaching, and Task-Based Language Teaching. The authors conclude with a reflection on the various methods and criticisms directed towards each approach, as well as with a discussion of possible future developments in language teaching.

Overall, the authors succeed very well in accomplishing what they set out to do. Their model provides readers with a framework by which they can analyze and compare various methods. Using this framework can help the readers make an informed choice and thus avoid the reinventing of the wheel, which tends to happen when gurus are followed blindly. This book would be a good choice for students beginning a Master's degree program, for example, because of the Bibliography and Further Reading list at the end of each chapter, as well as for veteran teachers wishing to become more informed about developments in language teaching. It would also be an appropriate choice for staff rooms or personal libraries.

## References

- Lange, D. (1990). A blueprint for a teacher development program. In J.C. Richards & D. Nunan (Eds.), *Second language teacher education* (pp.245-268). New York: Cambridge University Press.

*Historical Linguistics*. Herbert Schendl. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. xi + 130 pp.

*Reviewed by*

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This slim volume is one of the latest in the *Oxford Introductions to Language Studies* series. The series is edited by H.G. Widdowson, and the writer of this book, Herbert Schendl, is Professor of English Linguistics at the University of Vienna. The book surveys different theories and methodologies, and explains past and present trends in the subject, such as recent influences from neo-Darwinian evolutionary thought. The sections on readings and references give well-focused reviews of major works in the field and are invaluable for newcomers.

Historical linguistics has been an academic topic for over two hundred years in the west, and investigates the history of languages: why and how they change; the prehistory of languages; and the continuing changes. For any language these are engrossing issues – and some linguists may spend their career studying one section of one language. An example given of grammatical change is the case of a village in India (Kupwar), where the inhabitants grow up speaking three languages (Urdu, Marathi, and Kannada). While the vocabularies have remained distinct, the grammars have become almost identical. Schendl gives no further information but, using the Internet, I was able to track down references to the village, and found the study fascinating.

Although language change usually occurs unintentionally, it can also be the result of planning. Schendl discusses this with regard to Indonesia after its war of independence from the Netherlands and how the government successfully introduced a standardized version of Bahasa Indonesia. Sometimes such planning is not so successful, as in the Republic of Ireland, and sometimes the result is undetermined, such as with the Maori language in New Zealand.

One might worry that a book on such a theoretical subject would be a touch abstruse and technical, or, on the other hand, considering the notebook size, think it a narrative version of *Cliff Notes*. In fact, it pares down and makes comprehensible this complex subject. Schendl's writing is generally understandable, but there are times when brevity comes at the expense of clarity. Take this sentence in the first paragraph of Chapter 1. "Linguistic changes tend to be the result of two equivalent forms coexisting as variants for some time, and one giving way to the other" (p. 3). I had to read this twice before understanding that in any language there might be two words, for example, with the same meaning, both being used until eventually one of the words becomes more popular and finally displaces the other. This seems simple enough, common sense even, and an outcome of the book is that it shows how much of the theory of historical linguistics rests on basic principles. The book does what it is meant to do—give a "broad map" of the area, as Widdowson states in his preface. It is useful for students who are about to embark on a serious study of the field and also for anyone who only needs an outline. I finished the book feeling that I would have liked more on most topics, no doubt a sign of interest stimulated by the writing.