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BOOK REVIEW

Marie Emmitt, Linda Komesaroff and John Pollock (2006).
Language and Learning: An Introduction for Teaching. 4th ed.
Melbourne: Oxford University Press. 258 pp.
ISBN 9 78019555 125

reviewed by Colette Mrowa-Hopkins (Flinders University)

This book provides a foundation for understanding language in the classroom. It clearly appeals to a well-defined audience of language educators who are practising teachers of English or of another language, in any context, or involved in pre-service teacher education. It claims to “support teachers in expanding their knowledge about language and the implications for teaching” (p. x), and to oblige them to reflect upon and evaluate their practices. The authors are very explicit about enhancing their targeted readers’ “understanding of the nature and function of language and language learning in order to assist [their] decision-making in the classroom”, but, as they are quick to remark, “[t]his is not a ‘how to’ book” (p. xi).

The theoretical background informing this 4th edition (the first edition appeared in 1991) builds on the socio-cultural constructivist view of language learning, with an emphasis on critical pedagogies, particularly apt, as we are told, to “empower” students through literacy education. The authors state quite openly that they have distilled concepts and insights from different theoretical perspectives with a view to enable individual teachers to construct their own theory. In this way, sounder theoretical knowledge should assist teachers in their practice, and strengthen their ability to explain a program to the wider community of colleagues, students and their parents. Developing an enhanced understanding of learning and appreciation of language is unarguably very valuable for teachers who, in this way, should be better equipped to manage the many contemporary and controversial issues that confront them as they carry out their professional activities. However, at times, this reviewer felt that the dilution of established linguistics theories leads to some concepts being juxtaposed without any clear articulation of their connection, and unfortunately there does not appear to be, either in the text or as an entry in the glossary or index, any discussion of the nature of constructivism, about which teachers are bound to enquire.

The content is divided into three main sections: *Language and Culture* (Part 1), *Linguistics and Language Structure* (Part 2) and *Language and Learning* (Part 3). Each chapter within the three sections includes pre-reading activities and several suggestions for further activities and discussion. These can all be workshopped in class. Sections at the end of each chapter include a summary of the chapter and

implications for teaching. This reflects the pedagogical approach the authors intend to adopt; key points are highlighted in grey-shaded vignettes in the margins, and a reference list of “accessible” further reading is also provided at the end of each chapter, with a more extended bibliography at the end of the book. Apart from the first chapter, which introduces the context of the other chapters and gives an overview of the concept of language, the authors do not prescribe to follow the chapters in any particular order, as each can be explored in a way that suits individual learning objectives.

In chapter 2, the authors take the view that language is inextricably linked to social and cultural practices. The role of literacy in learning dominates this chapter and should provide the link that connects all the concepts that are being introduced. There are excellent illustrations with examples drawn from contemporary Australia, e.g. the treatment of “asylum seekers” in the media. At times, the relationship between the examples and the concepts is difficult to see. Similarly with the section on language and communication, the quotation that accompanies the ecological model presented (p. 42) does not clarify it in any meaningful way. The section on how language shapes reality also does not do justice to the whole issue of how we construct the world through our cultural lenses. The attempt by the authors to cover the breadth of the field leads to a simplification of the theoretical background that inevitably weakens the academic interest of the book.

Chapter 3 examines the cultural influences on language use and discusses different views and attitudes concerning languages. Throughout this chapter there are references to what teachers can do about differences in language use that they observe. The point is made that teachers need to stress the importance of language awareness in learning and to broaden the experience of communicating. In the Australian context, sensitivity to context, including gender and social differences, is more at the forefront than sensitivity to regional dialects, since the boundaries between these are loosely defined. Teachers need to teach students to use language appropriately for a variety of purposes, accepting that their students’ view of the world is as valid as their own.

Part 2, *Linguistics and Language Structure*, starts in chapter 4 by emphasizing the importance of learning grammar, and more generally linguistics in order to acquire “a language to talk about language” (p. 80) and make explicit the structure of language so that learners become more aware of the power relationship invested in language and how to critically interpret texts in different contexts. In attempting to give definitions of the term linguistics, the authors stress the social perspective of language besides its forms or structure. Drawing from different schools of linguistics, the chapter goes on to elaborate on the distinctions between traditional and functional grammars, which the authors usefully present in the form of a comparative table, adopting terminology that would be most familiar to readers (pp. 90-91). However, the notion of “register” (p. 88), borrowed from Halliday’s systemic functional grammar, could be distinguished more clearly from its more commonly accepted meaning found in sociolinguistics, which is also the only definition that this reviewer found in the glossary at the end of the book. The chapter moves on to briefly address the notion of critical language awareness that emphasises “how power relations affect and are reflected in language” (p. 92). The relevant issue for teachers is: what can be taught in terms of level of correctness without invalidating the learners’ home language? The point of view adopted here is that “correct” grammar should not be taught formally as a set of rules out of context, but the conventions of language should be explained to students as the need arises through the study of a variety of text-types.

In chapter 5, the notion of what constitutes a text is briefly considered with regard to discourse analysis and text linguistics. The definition of genre is addressed from multiple perspectives, which for linguists and educators may be broadly extended beyond the notion of text types: “the structure of language used for a specific purpose in a particular social context” (p.101). The teacher needs to know the structure of different “genres” in order to “empower” young children who are learning to read and write. The relationship between ideas and the structure of a text can be analysed using a top level structure, or looking at patterns in specialised texts such as comparisons, problems and solutions, cause and effects, descriptions, lists, and so on. There are summary tables of top-level structures with their characteristics signal words. The table of cohesive ties from Halliday and Hasan (1976) can be used as a reliable tool for describing and analysing the semantic relations in a text. The pedagogical implications are clearly summarized at the end of the chapter reinforcing the need for teachers to be aware all along of the knowledge of a text structure so as to help students become more efficient language users themselves.

In chapter 6, on *Syntax, morphology, and lexicology*, the authors acknowledge the importance of traditional structures to describe language for teachers who need to explain how language rules are formed. The focus here is evidently on English syntax whereby several sample activities are used to illustrate word order and morpheme formation through rearrangement and substitutions, and the breaking down of sentences into its primary constituents. Examples of punctuation and varying intonation patterns show how the meaning of sentences can be altered. More is added on the history of the English language to explain the origin of words that has influenced spelling. Teachers who have an understanding of these can easily share it with their students. This chapter is necessarily a condensed version of the topics alluded to in the title, each of which could be the subject of a whole book.

Chapter 7 is devoted to phonology, since knowledge of the relationship between speech and writing is important for teachers. The basics of phonology and phonetics are sketched with activities aimed at raising teachers’ awareness in order to help early readers and writers to learn the relationship between sounds and letters. However, a warning is issued against using phonics in isolation for teaching reading and writing.

Chapter 8 develops the complex relationship between speech and writing through an attempt at differentiating, in table form, the characteristics of each mode (pp. 152-153). No mention is made of the rapidly emerging new forms of written communication through text messages, e-mails, and so on. It is not clear whether this omission was deliberate, as this chapter anticipates the difficulties that can be experienced by learners who are unfamiliar with certain structures of the written code.

Part 3, *Language and Learning*, deals more specifically with the developmental aspect of language, treating the acquisition of language and second language learning in chapter 9 and 10 respectively.

Chapter 9 gives an overview of language learning theories starting from Skinner’s verbal theory and Chomsky’s cognitivist view, to arrive at an explanation of language learning as social interaction. This perspective is drawn mainly from Halliday’s functional account that the linguistic and cognitive aspects of language development have to be supplemented by a social dimension. The development of both structure and function in constructing meaning in children’s early language development is seen as a means of performing particular communicative functions (Halliday 1975). Some of the problems associated with the traditional stages of development identified by Roger Brown in the 70s are brought to attention. The

summary makes complex theories easily accessible by focussing on what is useful for teachers and learners. In the further reading section only two authors are mentioned.

Chapter 10 gives a very brief evaluation of second language learning theories, albeit with a definition of key terms that is quite useful. In considering the factors that influence second language learners, following Spolsky's model, the authors give prominence to the cognitive and affective factors over the socio-cultural factors, which is perhaps surprising given the socio-cultural perspective that is endorsed at the beginning of the book.

The basic premise adopted in chapter 11, *Learning Literacy*, is that education is never value-free and that "[t]eaching and learning just isn't a matter of skill acquisition or knowledge transmission or natural growth. It's about building identities and cultures, communities and institutions" (p. 206, quoted from Luke and Freebody, 1999). Thus critical literacy is emphasised, starting from the principle, which is based on numerous evidence from children's practices, that children learn the purpose of writing well before they learn the actual conventions of handwriting, spelling, and composition. This chapter stresses the multiple nature of literacies, which involves more than breaking codes. At the opposite end, text analysts understand that "texts are not neutral but represent particular views that can be challenged" (p. 209). Here the further reading list is quite extensive in comparison to the one in the preceding chapters.

Chapter 12 provides a summary of the book that stresses the centrality of language in learning: "One theory that complements our view is [...] social constructivism" (p. 219). This perspective emphasises the influence of the social context of learning since the authors effectively stress that it is both an individual and a social process. In conclusion, the implications of language learning for the classroom are that teachers are responsible for using language in ways that encourage flexible thinking, and that learning takes place through engagement with the tasks: "Activities that involve ways of knowing other than linguistic should be an integral part of the language curriculum" (p. 226).

The best aspects of this book are its presentation, since it is written in a clear and accessible way that makes it particularly suited to students enrolled in Education courses, perhaps at a postgraduate level, such as a Graduate Certificate. The acquisition of some notions of linguistics would undoubtedly be helpful to teachers who may have lacked grounding in language structures in their training. Part 2 on *Linguistics and language structure*, is particularly informative in this respect. The presentation is very user friendly with handy summaries of key ideas throughout each chapter. These memory anchors are useful for referring quickly back to these ideas. The authors provide many illustrations, with most examples drawn from Australian contemporary issues. The references have naturally been updated since the previous edition. In addition, at the end of the book there is a glossary of language key terms, which is quite useful, and rarely seen in academic books published in Australia.