

Issues in Applying SLA Theories toward Reflective and Effective Teaching

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Issues in Applying SLA Theories (hereafter Issues) comprises volume seven in the series, *Critical New Literacies: The Praxis of English Language Teaching and Learning (PELT)*.

What is meant by reflective teaching? In their article on writing, Zeraatpish and Azarnoosh offer the following definition: “Reflection is regarded as a process through which teachers observe their beliefs and practices, assess, restructure their teaching and learning so that they can better situate themselves as agents of change in the immediate contexts of teaching” (165). Effective teaching, in contrast, involves conscious monitoring of student needs and progress, followed by corresponding adjustments in one’s instruction.

Issues is a collection of fourteen essays by a global array of authors. Most hold doctoral degrees, with teaching experience ranging from assistant professors to emeritus professors. Several serve as editors of major publications in the field of Second Language Acquisition.

Part One concentrates on six theories that have influenced language learning pedagogy. Part Two addresses eight skills necessary for learning a language.

Theories explored in Part One include behaviorism, cognitive approaches, constructivism, connectionism, interactionism, and critical theories. Behaviorism’s attention to stimulus and response led to the emphasis on language drills found in the Audio-Lingual Method. Cognitive approaches bring together rationalist and empiricist viewpoints, valuing both Chomsky’s innate Universal Grammar and also the importance of learning through experimentation. Constructivism in language learning involves forming increasingly more complex categories of information by analyzing similar elements, whether individually (cognitive constructivism) or in community (social constructivism). Connectionism draws from the design of digital computers to consider how parallel distributed processing (or artificial neural networks) serve the task of pattern recognition. Interactionism holds that language learners benefit from conversational communication, which involves input, negotiation of meaning, noticing, and second language output. Critical Second Language teaching would value “a listening phase on the part of the course designer or teacher, and... finding out about the learners’ real lives and needs” (70), then creatively adjusting the course correspondingly.

The remaining eight chapters turn from theory to praxis, exploring what it means to teach particular skills in a reflective and effective manner: pronunciation, grammatical competence, vocabulary, idioms, speaking, writing, listening, and reading. For example, instructors are encouraged to journal after class sessions to become attentive to trends in student performance of pronunciation. Grammatical competence can be enhanced by immersive use of illustrated fiction readings, with discussion and open-ended composition assignments. Vocabulary learning will be more effective as students are encouraged to master roughly 2000 words, whether isolated lexemes, word families, or phrasal vocabulary, so that they may produce them in speech and in writing. Idioms will be learned more effectively through a pragmatic approach that is attentive to context and the speaker’s aims. Speaking will improve as instructors facilitate conversation that is incremental and attentive to stages of students’ proficiency. Writing instruction can be segmented into eight discreet stages. And listening comprehension improves as students appreciate and attend to specific processes at work during periods of concentrated listening. Reading fluency, defined as the ability to read “effortlessly and confidently at a level of understanding and a rate appropriate for the purpose or task and the material” (Day, 203), requires automatic recognition of words which results from students having read large quantities of easy and interesting material.

Instructors of English as a Foreign Language comprise the principal audience for *Issues*. Those who, like the reviewer, teach a classical language will benefit primarily from R. R. Day’s insights concerning literacy (199–208), and also from Nurmukhamedov and Plonsky’s essay on vocabulary (115–26).