

BOOK REVIEWS

A COGNITIVE APPROACH TO LANGUAGE LEARNING

Peter Skehan

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Reviewed by

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This latest work by Peter Skehan is not for the uninitiated. Entitled *A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning*, it attempts to outline a view of SLA from exactly this perspective. Those readers unfamiliar with the main arguments surrounding key issues in second language acquisition (SLA) like the debate between comprehension and production-oriented views of second language processing, input processing, and universalist models of language learning, will find this book difficult to follow and understand. In essence, it assumes a fair bit of background knowledge on the subject matter. In his preface, Skehan himself states that his main goal is to redress the imbalances in the literature on SLA which he argues has focused too predominantly on linguistic and sociolinguistic concerns. He also states in no uncertain terms that the main perspective that will be taken throughout the book is a psycholinguistic one, one which will look exclusively at the cognitive abilities of the learners and the processing problems they encounter in language learning.

The key premise that Skehan proceeds with is that an excessive focus on language use, which necessarily contains the pressures of real-time processing, does not contribute in any significant way to the development of an analytical system of knowledge since the focus on meaning reduces the amount of attention that can be devoted to form. Thus, he points out that such

focus on use, with its attendant processing problems for the learner, does not lead convincingly towards second language change. By change, he refers here to the issue of change in the interlanguage system of the learner. In effect, what Skehan argues is that there needs to be more attention paid to approaches which, while dealing principally with meaningful communication, nevertheless direct attention to form in some way, either through inductive methods or consciousness-raising.

Skehan goes about presenting a case for this perspective by looking at two major themes in his book. Firstly, he discusses psycholinguistic and cognitive aspects of language learning. The key issue that he focuses on here is one of information processing. More specifically, he looks at how the demands of real-time processing affect the attentional resources of learners during the input, central processing, and output phases of information processing. Studies which have investigated processing variables such as working (short-term) and long-term memory (ie. Gathercole & Baddeley 1994), noticing (ie. Schmidt 1990), and attention are presented and examined for the explanations they provide on the constraints these factors present for language processing.

Secondly, Skehan discusses the differences between universalist and differential accounts of language learning. Research which looks primarily at (universal) similarities between learners, such as that dealing with critical period (ie. Johnson & Newport 1991), is contrasted with research which focuses on learner differences such as research on language aptitude (i.e. Carroll 1991) and learning style (i.e. Willing 1987). He points out through such contrasts that there is an importance to considering both perspectives when discussing the issues of language change and processing performance.

The influence of this psycholinguistic discussion on information processing and language performance is then more fully explicated when applied to two pedagogical issues: task-based instruction and language testing. With regard to three aspects of performance (accuracy, fluency, and complexity) in the areas of task-based instruction and language testing, he argues that the emphasis should be placed on accuracy and complexity.

Hence, greater efforts must be taken to ensure that more attention to form (i.e. accuracy) is realized so that interlanguage development can proceed, which he argues should logically be the main goal for both task-based instruction and language testing.

There are however some curious points about this work. Firstly, while seeming to advocate emphasis on recognizing individual learner differences such as in terms of aptitude or learning style and downplaying any focus on universalist theories of SLA such as Universal Grammar (p.78-80), he goes on to advocate in his conclusion that what is needed are "...more sophisticated models of attention...which can be the basis for more selective predictions of attentional effects" (p.292), a view which smacks of a tendency towards universalist-oriented model-building. This is also telling in his view of what the purpose of task-based instruction should be, namely to ensure the development of the interlanguage system of the learner, a system that *Stevens* (1992) has pointed out contains two largely unquestioned assumptions. One, that forms of interlanguage are deviations from a single NS norm. And two, that all interlanguages are points on a path toward a universal NS norm (*Stevens* 1992:45). The concept of interlanguage is itself controversial and hence to base an argument upon it seems precarious. Secondly, there does not seem to be any consideration for the "learnability" of particular language items (*Ellis* 1993) in his arguments on information processing. There seems to be the assumption in this argument that if an item is noticed, attended to, and retained in memory, that it can be comprehended and acquired. Perhaps this kind of discussion is outside the realm of pure processing concerns, but it does raise interesting questions as to what is to be included and excluded in discussions on cognition and psycholinguistics.

Nevertheless, *Skehan* has stated that his reason for writing this book was to redress imbalances in the research literature and to offer an alternative account of the processes involved in second language learning. He has done so in this book and quite convincingly. Through the use of the two themes discussed above, *Skehan* has offered a valuable look into the cognitive processes that affect second language learning. His focus is clearly on cognition. In his conclusion, he is adamant in claiming that second language learning is a cognitive process, one which is linked to aptitudinal components

and governed by memory functioning. Skehan's psycholinguistic argument is a limited one and one that does not (nor intends to) fully explain the range of processes that second language learners undergo or the influences which affect the success or failure to learn language. But it does make a welcome contribution to the literature on second language learning, a literature which he argues has been dominated by "linguistically-motivated universals and sociolinguistic generalizations" (p.4).

References

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