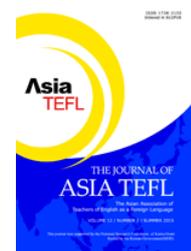




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Book Review

Introduction to Instructed Second Language Acquisition, by Shawn Loewen, New York, Routledge, 2015, 210pp., ¥ 543 (Paperback), ISBN 978-0-415-52954-9

The whole book, *Introduction to Instructed Second Language Acquisition*, has 11 chapters. Chapter One gives a definition of ISLA, reviews relevant SLA theories, and presents the “bedrock assumption” of ISLA that instruction can be beneficial for L2 acquisition (p. 14). Chapter Two distinguishes explicit/declarative knowledge from implicit/procedural L2 knowledge, claiming the importance of implicit knowledge in L2 production and communication. Chapter Three discusses the role of interaction in L2 classroom instruction. Chapter Four, entitled “Focus on Form” (FoF), is intended to engage learners in both communication and linguistic forms, so that fluency and accuracy could be achieved as a double-win effect. Chapters Five to Eight touch upon the role of explicit teaching on acquisition of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and pragmatics. Chapter Nine probes into different contexts’ effects on L2 learning. Chapter Ten is about the individual differences in motivation, willingness to communicate, learning strategies, learning styles, personality, language learning aptitude, working memory and their impacts on L2 learning. The last chapter concludes the whole book by reiterating the basic concern, goal, and benefits of ISLA for L2 learning.

The book has a few remarkable features. First, it focuses on what teaching can do for L2 learning. It is argued by some that teaching does little in helping L2 learning because “it can’t change any of the inherent processes in SLA” (see VanPatten, 2007, p. 114). Loewen’s book, however, is devoted to what teaching can do and digs into its strengths in aiding L2 learning. True, it is necessary to know what teaching can’t do, but it is more important to understand what teaching can do. An important implication of this book is that it is high time that we started to consider what we can do in the classroom and how we can optimize the effect of instruction to help L2 learners develop their communicative and linguistic competence.

Second, ISLA hypotheses are fairly treated and assessed. This can be seen in balancing the important roles of implicit knowledge and explicit instruction. It is true that L2 production mainly depends on implicit knowledge, but the importance of explicit instruction is not played down. Classroom activities can be designed in an attempt to enable learners to build their own implicit linguistic system. The concepts of interaction and focus on form are scrutinized in great detail, and numerous insightful findings are evaluated impartially. While communicative tasks are highly valued because they provide opportunities to communicate in the L2, shortcomings are also pointed out: not all interaction is successful in all contexts, especially meaning-focused interaction which may not make linguistic structures as salient to learners as is needed for acquisition. The disclosure of interaction’s limitations leads to the inquiry of focus on form, in which the effects of each type of FoF on L2 acquisition are presented. From an acquisitional perspective, mastering a language means mastering its forms, and accuracy is equally important as fluency in communication. The advantage of FoF over meaning-based interaction is that it concerns both meaning and form.

Third, there is a close integration of empirical studies and meta-analyses in illustrating the effects of classroom instruction. Large numbers of empirical studies provide insights for L2 teaching. For example,

the abundant empirical evidence on noticing, input flood, input enhancement, and LRE suggest that the important question for ISLA is not just whether FoF occurs during interaction, but whether FoF can bring about increased noticing and acquisition of linguistic forms. What's more, those empirical findings in Chapters 5-8 show the effects of different kinds of instruction on acquisition of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and pragmatics. Meta-analyses synthesize a large number studies of the same category, and summarizes their commonalities on specific issues in ISLA. For instance, the effectiveness of explicit classroom instruction has been confirmed by quite a few meta-analyses, one of which is done by Norris and Ortega (p. 14), who examined 49 ISLA research studies, and came to the conclusion that explicit instruction was effective and results of instruction were durable. These large-scale meta-analyses are interwoven with empirical studies and theoretical propositions, working together to strengthen the efficacy of classroom instruction upon L2 learning.

However, this book is not without limitations. First, it probes into ISLA and its relationships with the development of L2 competence from a single cognitive interactionist perspective, neglecting socio-cultural factors in the context of ISLA (Block, 2012). This may limit the view of the whole picture, and prevents readers from understanding the multi-faceted nature of L2 acquisition in instructed contexts. Second, categorizing "study abroad" as a context of ISLA seems to be problematic, because most study abroad contexts are not solely designed for developing L2 competence, but for acquiring other academic knowledge, or building cultural or academic awareness. They do not totally qualify as ISLA contexts.

To sum up, Shawn Loewen's book presents a cohesive synthesis of ISLA research, summarizing a large body of empirical studies and meta-analyses on the effects of instruction. All this provides valuable insights for both L2 researchers and learners, demonstrating the fact that L2 can be successfully taught and learned in classrooms.

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