

BOOK REVIEWS

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Using IT in Language Classroom: A Guide for Teachers and Students in Asia

Reviewer: Daniel Churchill

The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Authors:	Phillip A. Towndrow and Michael Vallance
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What is the effective use of IT in contemporary English language classroom? How do teachers' and students' roles change? How can digital instruments amplify human capabilities? These are the central questions that the authors attempt to answer in their book. With all the spirit and strong conviction that IT advances human learning in language classroom, the

authors carefully acknowledged criticism, provided opposite views of digital skeptics and rightly pointed readers' attention to important affordances of IT for learning. For these authors, the computer is a tool, a co-worker, a teacher and a co-learner which thus provides an alternative context for social interaction, language development, corrective feedback and analytical tasks. At the center of authors' understanding of learning appears to be that learning is an activity and the critical competency of teachers is the design of pedagogically sound digital tasks for learning.

The book is convincing: IT is worth of time and effort in language learning based on what they call 'informed use.' Appealing laid out with easy to follow written language makes this publication an effective vehicle to deliver its powerful ideas to wide audience of readers.

Readers are advised to begin their search for direction in pedagogical practice with IT by examining their local teaching and learning circumstances and personal experiences, and by considering the views of economists, educational policy-makers, politicians. Readers are constantly reminded that if technology is to be considered worthy of the time and effort of teachers and students then we need to provide essential guidance on how the desired educational objectives can be planned and achieved. This achievement can be made through the application of socially-oriented digitally-literate actions and strategies. The authors contend that when IT is used in a language classroom it should be done with the intention of adding value to a 'good' learning task which involves teachers and learners in comprehending, producing and/or interacting in the target language. Rather than simply being just reading material, the book provides a set of activities which engage readers in exploring good practice in the design and production of digital language learning task. The readers are urged to be able to plan, produce and use digital materials effectively in order to meet the requirements of contemporary classroom pedagogy and practice. Some, though limited, technical instructions attempt to point readers to the most appropriate tools for design of digital learning task and resources. However, a clear message is sent by the authors that "being technically competent does not equate to

being technically proficient” and that teachers who design activities must be guided by sound pedagogy and have sound reasons for using the technology to meet learning objectives.

The authors continuously advise the readers to avoid falling in trap of being driven by the past understanding of learning not relevant to the contemporary digital world and knowledge society. The book thus provides a unique historical perspective of development of IT in education and it reminds the readers that IT today should be used to empower students to become better learners rather than to re-affirm traditional modes of teacher-directed instructions. Teacher’s and students’ roles change as they embrace IT in contemporary relevant classroom. These roles change from being an instructional transmitter to that of facilitator with students as an integral part of the material design process. Towndrow and Vallance urge readers to examine strategies to assist their students to become an integral part of this design process. Some useful ideas from the book inform readers as teachers to remain effective they need to become partners with the students in learning, sharing and collaboration.

The main focus of the book, to design new pedagogy to work with IT rather than rely on traditional teaching methods is supported by a variety of references, previous research, case studies and existing practices in the field. The book provides an excellent coverage, case studies and examples of technology integration in South East Asia. The authors have engaged a number of colleagues from the region who have contributed by providing short reports from their respective countries. However, the significance of the ideas delivered in this publication is well applicable beyond this region. The significance of ideas from the book, are applicable to teachers any where in the world and beyond language classroom.

A Philosophy of Second Language Acquisition

Reviewer: Tae-Young Kim

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Author:	Marysia Johnson
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A recent trend in second language acquisition (SLA) and the teaching of English as a foreign language (TEFL) is the application of Vygotskian sociocultural theory to these two areas of scholarship. The book, *A Philosophy of Second Language Acquisition*, reflects this trend in a timely and careful manner. It contains perhaps the most controversial argument in the field: a dialogical approach should replace the cognitive approach in SLA.

The author's confident assertion echoes well in the last two sentences of the book: "The time has come to give new voices a chance. The time has come to give a dialogically based approach to SLA theories serious consideration." The author's theoretical position seems in contrast to "non-mainstream" views as compared with her predecessor, James Lantolf (1996), who has always cautiously argued for the place of Vygotskian perspectives in SLA since it does not intend to replace the Cartesian positivistic view, but will function as a complementary view in the arena. Johnson maintains that the adaptation of the dialogical paradigm, which is mainly indebted to Vygotsky and Bakhtin's works, to SLA will overcome the limitations of two previous models: behaviorist and cognitive paradigms. Acknowledging

language as the prime tool for cognitive development, Vygotsky (1978) endeavored to find the origin of human knowledge not from isolated individuals but from society and language wherein. In a similar vein, Bakhtin (1981) develops important concepts such as heteroglossia, which can be generally understood as multiplicity of the meaning of utterances spoken within an apparently unitary speech community.

The book is comprised of two parts: (i) *following the cognitive tradition* and (ii) *a dialogical approach to SLA*. In Part One, the author develops her argument first summarizing behaviorism and cognitive traditions established by Chomsky (1975) and Krashen (1985). Then she criticizes previous communicative competence models proposed by Hymes (1972), Canale and Swain (1980), and Bachman (1990) for their negligence of complicated social reality that second language learners face in their daily lives. The author accepts interactional competence held by Young (1999) as an alternative model.

In Part Two, Johnson introduces essentials of Vygotsky's theory such as human higher mental functions, the zone of proximal development, the role of mediation, and activity theory. The author also introduces, in Chapter 7, the Bakhtinian concept, dialogized heteroglossia, in order to complement Vygotskian theory. This approach, according to the author, has the potential to change the current acquisition metaphor into participation metaphor. In justifying her assertion, in Chapter 8, Johnson provides convincing research evidence from two influential books: *Vygotskian approach to second language research*, edited by Lantolf and Appel (1994) and *Sociocultural theory and second language learning*, edited by Lantolf (2000).

Chapter 9 allows the author to emphasize the legitimacy of the dialogical approach to SLA and its applicability to language teaching and testing. In this chapter, she relinquishes the existing dichotomy of language competence and language performance, and instead suggests using a neutral term, *ability*, to integrate these two concepts. Johnson goes so far as to assert that "second language ability is not situated in the learner's mind but in a multitude of sociological and institutional settings" (p. 172).

Throughout the book, the author reiterates her support for the Vygotskian SCT and Bakhtinian dialogical perspectives and makes clear her desire to see a change from the current cognitive traditions in SLA into a more socially mediated approach. Yet, despite these merits, there are minor shortcomings, which require further theoretical clarification.

First, in the previous chapters and particularly in Chapter 9, she should have made some theoretical refinements. For example, she consistently uses dichotomous distinctions between native speaker and non-native speaker; and between native language culture and target language culture which from a SLA perspective are problematic in themselves. The author even used the term “border-crossing” (p. 179, p. 188), which insinuates that there are two separate realities: first language (community) and second language (community). Given that her main purpose is to problematize previous dichotomies such as performance and competence, I think that she overuses dichotomies in her arguments and this may lead to confusion for the reader. In addition, citing Pavlenko and Lantolf’s (2000) study, the author seems to accept a unidirectional path in identity (re)construction and presents identity as an entity such as an American identity. However, research findings suggest that identity is multiply constructed depending upon a language learner’s various sociocultural contexts (e.g., Luke & Luke, 1998).

Another pitfall can be found in the author’s argument of language testing (Chapter 9), where she almost introduces her own second language testing model, Practical Oral Language Ability. It would be certainly a viable effort to re-orientate the current testing theory measuring actual level of development into alternative oral proficiency testing focusing on potential level of development. However, she should have provided criteria for excluding testing of literacy, which in itself comprises another important area of language testing. The question could be posed “Does the author presuppose the primacy of oracy over literacy in such a case?”.

In sum, this new volume by Marysia Johnson can guide many novice SLA researchers and graduate students to the understandings of the fundamental concepts in Vygotskian and Bakhtinian theories. Despite some problems, the

author seems to accomplish her mission in a clear and coherent manner: to reconceptualize the dominant positivistic cognitive paradigms in SLA into a dialogical mediation paradigm.

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