

Current Trends in the Development and Teaching of the Four Language Skills

Esther Usó-Juan & Alicia Martínez-Flor (eds).

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The book *Current Trends in the Development and Teaching of the Four Language Skills* makes an excellent contribution to the literature on the development and teaching of the four language skills from a communicative competence perspective. It does so, first, by advancing a communicative competence framework which is intended to show how each skill may trigger the development of linguistic, pragmatic, strategic, and intercultural competence which ultimately lead to overall and agglutinating discourse competence and, secondly, by carefully gathering and organizing articles which include up-to-date theoretical constructs and research findings in the development of the four skills and linking them to actual teacher development and practice. Editors and authors Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor address their book to language teachers and pose the intelligent and well-documented challenge of improving their teaching of the four skills by better understanding how second/foreign language (L2) learning processes work.

In Section I, under the title “Theoretical perspectives on language learning and teaching”, Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor present us with a thorough revision of approaches to language learning, followed by a meticulous analysis of communicative perspectives on L2 teaching springing from linguistics and cognitive psychology which, in turn, leads them to proposing their own framework of communicative competence. They synthesize the environmentalist, innatist, and interactionist perspectives on language learning and carefully analyze how such conceptions have motivated different approaches to language teaching, an enlightening overview which is then systematically applied to each specific skill in the introductory chapters to each section. Secondly, the authors carefully consider the different communicative models available in the literature before they advance their own proposal. In the third part, Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor re-conceptualize some of the existing models and propose a framework which sets discourse competence at the core of the system. Their genuine and most interesting contribution to general models of communicative competence is the integration into their framework of the four language skills and the

intercultural dimension of communicative competence, which were absent in previous models.

Section II is introduced by Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor's application of their communicative competence framework to the skill of listening. The authors start with the passive role of listening in the environmentalist approach, then focus on the overemphasis of reception to the detriment of production in the innatist approach, and finally emphasize the interactive, social, and contextualized role of listening in the interactionist approach. The four other competences, linguistic, pragmatic, strategic, and intercultural competence are scrutinized in relation to the core discourse competence. In the second chapter, Rost provides an excellent overview of the areas of research influencing L2 listening instruction, and focuses on the accessibility of input, top-down and bottom-up processes, and listener status. Especially useful for teachers are the research questions that Rost poses towards the end of the section. Mendelsohn's practice-oriented chapter emphasizes the need for teachers to teach how to listen rather than test their learners' listening ability, which is still a widespread approach in most teaching contexts. In the fourth chapter, Lynch tackles the issue of combining top-down processes with bottom-up ones and makes specific suggestions as to how to balance both kinds of processes and relates them to learners at different stages of development. Closing the section, White proposes a more global approach to listening which goes beyond the goal of learning, and emphasizes the importance of listening for socializing, gathering information, accessing the media and promoting cognitive development.

In Section III, authors Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor and co-author Alcón Soler apply their communicative competence framework to the development of speaking. The three authors evaluate the environmentalist and innatist approaches and show how communicative intent is brought into the picture by advances in pragmatics such as Speech Act Theory or Politeness Theory. In the second chapter, Bygate addresses particular problems with oral pedagogy, with a special focus on the issue of repetition, which is presented as paramount for developing speaking, fluency, accuracy, and complexity. In the following chapter, Dalton-Puffer describes the role of speaking in the content and language integrated approach to language learning. Dalton-Puffer invites teachers to move from factual questions which stress the "what" toward questions that may help their learners develop the complexity of their oral production. In the fourth chapter of this section, Hughes scrutinizes how turn-taking proceeds in conversation, how awareness of

conversational patterns can be raised before production, and how simple conversation analysis may be used to introduce the way that speakers take turns, which together may be instrumental in building learners' confidence in speaking. To conclude the section, Burns advances a carefully argued and appealing text-based approach to syllabus design for the promotion of speaking.

Section IV is devoted to the reading skill. In the implementation of their framework with the inclusion of the reading skill, Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor masterfully sketch the shift from early environmentalist conceptions in which readers played a passive role to, first, the innatist stance, which conceptualizes learners as active readers and, second, the interactionist approach, which focuses on the interaction between texts and readers. In the second chapter, Grabe sets forth a series of guiding principles for teaching reading which are based on what we know about mental processes involved in reading. Following Grabe's chapter, M. Ediger suggests developing strategic L2 readers by fostering meta-cognitive, cognitive, affective and social strategies for reading. Further on in the section, Field tries to answer the question of how competent readers can become fluent readers. Her chapter ends with a program to develop reading fluency which teachers and syllabus designers will find extremely useful. Concluding the section, Williams deals with both the "narrow" and "broad" perspectives on academic work on reading, hence combining findings in psycholinguistically-driven research with developments in literacy as social practice.

In Section V, authors Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor and co-author Palmer-Silveira draw our attention to the skill of writing. In their historical overview of approaches to writing they highlight the active role of learners in teaching perspectives springing from innatist and interactionist theories. While innatist approaches already mark a shift towards process-oriented writing, it is not until a Hallidayan conception of language appears that writing approaches start focusing on the "dynamic, creative and contextualized process of communicating through texts" (page 389), which is followed by Swales' genre research and Contrastive Rhetoric. Within their communicative competence framework, discourse features such as cohesion, coherence, as well as formal and knowledge schemata help structure texts with a communicative goal and within the context they are meant to be written. In the second chapter of this section, M. Johns provides a complete picture of research into writing which covers the areas of text, writer processes, participants, and contexts, and emphasizes the importance of

prioritizing process over product. In the third chapter, Kroll narrows her focus by targeting intermediate and advanced essay writing. She does so by accepting the importance of writing for fluency but underlines the need to focus on task design in order to help learners develop their writing skills beyond beginner levels. The following chapter, authored by Tribble, discusses the role of the native speaker underlying norm system, analyzes the place of native speaker texts in foreign language teaching, criticizes the filter that international communication gate-keepers apply for the selection and publication of texts in international journals. He also believes learners should have a more central role in accessing the system of rules by describing and analyzing expert texts. Finally, in the last chapter of the section and the book, and with an appealingly broader focus, Cumming discusses the enormous complexity of developing writing skills. At the centre of his concern is the role of the goals that teachers set for their learners and the goals that learners set for themselves when writing. He provides readers with a variety of options for the encouragement of goal-oriented writing.

As a way of evaluation, I would highlight three main virtues of *Current Trends in the Development and Teaching of the Four Language Skills*. First of all, the book masterfully bridges the gap which often exists between theory and research findings on the one hand and practical language teaching on the other. It comprehensively provides the latest theoretical constructs and research findings in the development of the four language skills, which may serve as the basis for well-informed teaching. Every skill-related section presents a balanced combination of articles that range from theory and findings to practical teaching ideas which apply those findings to each skill. Additionally, most of the issues tackled in the book stand as innovative suggestions for language teachers. Aided by a systematic structure of activation questions, followed by the main text in each chapter, and by readily applicable final activities, the book makes accessible and interesting reading. Secondly, it systematically applies the communicative competence framework that the authors advance in their first chapter to the four language skills. They do so by placing the development of discourse competence (i.e. the main goal of teaching) at the core of the system and relating it to the other four competences. The systematic historical reviews of the approaches to the teaching of the language skills and the links to historical and current teaching methodologies will help teachers reflect on their own pre-conceived ideas and preferences for teaching the four skills. Teachers may want to take the challenge and get closer to the robust findings triggered by research. Finally,

I would argue that the present book may be interesting for far more readers than the target readers that the authors suggest they have in mind. Hence, I believe that not only because of the authors' proposed framework of communicative competence but also because of the attractive and balanced combination of cutting-edge theory and research, the book will likely be of interest to researchers in the field of second language acquisition as well as to syllabus designers. In my view, *Current Trends in the Development and Teaching of the Four Language Skills* is certainly a must among professional language teachers.

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