

Book Review

The Role of Metalinguistic Awareness in the Effective Teaching of Foreign Languages (Rethinking Education, vol. 10), by Anthony David Roberts (2011). Oxford, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Wien: Peter Lang, 433 pages (Pbk), €53.30, ISBN 978-3-0343-0280-7

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This volume stems from the assumption that metalinguistic awareness, a skill developed during first language acquisition, is also fundamental to the development of second language competence in children. Such awareness is defined by the author, following Cadzen (1975, p. 603, cited on p. 1) as "...the ability to make language forms opaque and attend to them in and of themselves". The author further takes the stance that socio-cultural (or, more specifically, socio-cognitive) approaches to this object of study offer the most "explanatory power" (p. 4) and are thus most useful for educational purposes.

From the outset it can be said that the book does provide rich theoretical support for these two arguments; however, being based on the author's (who has since deceased) PhD thesis from 1999, the contribution may dissatisfy expert readers in that it fails to provide the sort of state-of-the-art on the issue that one expects from a 2011 publication. It is thus an interesting read as an introduction to the density of the theme for those not acquainted with the work carried out over previous decades. It must be advanced, too, that the book clearly favours experimental, over what the author calls "anecdotal" (p. 58) empirical approaches, which could discomfort those more inclined towards strongly interactionist approaches to cognition and second language development being constructed in discursive psychological (e.g. Potter & Edwards, 2003) and ethnomethodological (e.g. Coulter, 1991; Mondada & Pekarek Doehler, 2000; Pekarek Doehler, 2009) paradigms. It further stems from strongly monolingual assumptions about language learners and learning, as will be discussed below, which are difficult to assimilate in (at least) bilingual contexts such as Catalonia, from where this review is being written.

The book begins, in chapter one, by overviewing different and competing models of metacognitive and metalinguistic processes. In doing so, the author constructs a critique against nativist and constructivist/piagetian paradigms (which is not always immediately evident to the reader due to the complexity of bibliographical references included) in order to position himself as a socio-culturalist in the vygotskian tradition. Summing up the debate, as the author explains, there does exist certain consensus regarding the definition and function of meta-skills, such as regulating one's conscious attention, or planning and monitoring one's linguistic production. However, there are also significant differences; for example, regarding the relationship between metalinguistic and metacognitive processes and in terms of whether metalinguistic skills are considered simply a domain-specific application of more general metacognitive skills or not (for Vygotsky the former is a precondition for, thus obviously not a simple application of, the latter). There is also debate in terms of how the origin of these processes is conceptualised as being either maturational or socially interactive (for Vygotsky it is clearly the latter).

In chapter two, the author continues to develop his arguments in favour of or against the psychological models of cognition introduced in chapter one by looking more specifically at the relationship between the development of metalinguistic skills, first language learning and cognitive development. For readers familiar with Vygotsky's work, the conclusions presented by the author are quite apparent: a) that children initially interact (and repair their interactional moves) by attending primarily to communicative goals rather than to linguistic forms; b) that less indexicalised or contextually rich uses of languages encountered by children (e.g. the written word) force them to progressively "disembed language, to become aware that it is (explicit) choices made in the linguistic encoding of the message [...] that determines meaning" (p. 92); and c) that the development of such metalinguistic ability is also the embryo of specifically human ways of thinking, in that the ability of the child to disembed, reflect upon and control language – as the quintessential tool of thought – also paves the way for the ability to disembed, reflect on and control thought.

Chapter three strengthens these arguments by focussing more specifically on the development of first language literacy as a decisive transformation for the development of metalinguistic and metacognitive functions. The chapter then continues by turning the argument towards the relationship between first language metalinguistic awareness and second language development. Two positions are put forward by the author in this

regard, which could be rather problematic. On the one hand, the author argues that while the metalinguistic function is important to first language development, it is probably even more so for second language and, in particular, foreign language development. The author presumably bases this claim on the understanding that (classroom) learning of second or foreign languages is inherently context-poor – an argument that is increasingly being challenged by contemporary didactic approaches (e.g. content-rich language learning [CRL], content and language integrated learning [CLIL]). On the other hand, the author argues that metalinguistic awareness developed for the first language is a *pre-requisite* for second and foreign language acquisition and a predictor of aptitude. This strongly monolingual position is seriously challenged by the reality that the majority of the world's population speaks more than one language from infancy (i.e. before developing literacy), and also by the wealth of research demonstrating that the unique competence of these people involves the interconnection and *simultaneous* development of languages and language skills (e.g. Hall, Cheng & Carlson, 2006; Lüdi & Py, 2009).

The focus of chapter four is the variability of metalinguistic skills among school children in terms of their ability to consciously monitor and attend to linguistic input and output. The author relates such variable metalinguistic skills to differences in the semiotic experiences of children and their exposure to discourse modes which “aid or hinder” (p. 161) their transition to school language styles. He further relates this exposure to variables such as the social class of children's families – “the most significant social structure impacting upon the emergence of metalinguistic processes” (p. 184) – in adopting Bernstein's theory of codes. In doing so, he critically rebuts what he sees as misconceptions of this approach in the literature – in particular with reference to the notions of ‘restricted’ and ‘elaborate’ codes and the ‘cognitive deficit’ and ‘cognitive difference’ hypotheses. He claims that Bernstein's work, in fact, helps understand how children all start out with the same underlying language competence, and how differences in their metalinguistic awareness at later developmental stages may be explained in social terms by contemplating their different exposure to “restricted codes of largely implicit meanings” (p. 183) which provide “less opportunity to organise those linguistic items into a system of relevant options” (p. 184). Towards the end of the chapter, the author introduces the implications of such social differences in the development of metalinguistic skills for formal schooling, where elaborate language forms and the ability to consciously attend to language are predicated.

From here, for the remainder of the book (chapters 5-8), the author takes a more pedagogical stance by exploring curricular implications of the theoretical model developed in the previous four chapters. As he discusses in chapter five, the role of metalinguistic awareness in children's school development – and thus the need or not for explicit treatment of language in the curriculum – has generated much interest amongst educational authorities in the UK (and elsewhere). Taking the stance that by reflecting on what s/he already knows a child is able to develop towards what they do not, on the one hand, and that some children have few opportunities for such reflection outside of school, on the other, the author argues very much in favour of including of knowledge about language (KAL) in the school curriculum. This KAL should stem from the idea of language learning as 'semiotic apprenticeship' (following Wells) or 'functional variation' (following Halliday), draw on the contrastive analysis of what a child does and does not know, and include both top-down (e.g. contextual awareness of audience, purpose, understanding of message gist, genre, speech act, utterance or paragraph organisation) and bottom-up (e.g. syntax, intonation, word forms) attention to language. It is further implied in the chapter, as it is elsewhere in the book, that the ability to explicitly attend to the first language is useful for the *later* development of second or foreign language skills.

Chapters six and seven retake the discussion initiated in chapter three by focusing more specifically than elsewhere in the book on the differences between second and foreign language development and with first language processes. In doing so, they also return to the socio-cognitivist critique of nativist or 'communicative' (in the Krashen paradigm) approaches to foreign language pedagogy introduced at the start of the book, in that they fail to include the explicit focus on form necessary, in the author's view, to the development of target language (i.e. native-like) proficiency. However, like the book as a whole, these chapters fail to take into account perspectives on language acquisition that have also developed within the socio-cognitivist paradigm (e.g. Cook 1991, 2007; Hall, et al. 2006), and beyond, questioning taken-for-granted understandings of second language competence. The latter authors strongly critique idealisations of monolingual competences – such as those implicit in this book – that fail to account for the unique competences of plurilingual individuals. In focusing their discussion on 'communicative' foreign language pedagogical approaches based on nativist premises (e.g. early bilingual immersion approaches in which all language learning was assumed to be implicit and incidental), these chapters also fall short of

reflecting current didactic approaches in which the differences between first, second and foreign language learning are arguably diluted (e.g. recent CLIL approaches in which exposure to target language in context is enhanced and in which both content and language are attended to as objects of teaching and learning).

These significant issues aside, chapters six and seven are slightly more illustrative of classroom reality than previous ones in that they include excerpts (in all but one case borrowed from other researchers) of actual classroom interaction in order to exemplify what the author sees as beneficial attention to language form as it emerges in interaction (e.g. instructional and collaborative dialogue). Furthermore, the author argues in favour of task-based and dialogical pedagogical approaches as a favourable context for second and foreign language development – an argument that would be in line with current didactic approaches and more strongly interactionist socio-cultural research than that presented in this book (e.g. Mondada & Pekarek, 2004).

Summing up, the book provides a sound, if dense and slightly out-dated, introduction to the theme of metalinguistic awareness from a socio-cognitivist perspective and raises interesting issues for curriculum development and teaching practice. Being highly theoretical, however, it lacks a more ecological edge that takes classroom interaction as the starting point for exploring how the development of metalinguistic awareness and second/foreign language skills can be usefully accomplished by teachers and learners. Such an approach would arguably provide a more powerful descriptive basis for critical reflection and explanation of classroom reality for language teaching practitioners than the author has achieved.

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