

Psychology for Language Teachers: a Social Constructivist Approach

*Marion Williams and
Robert L. Burden*

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Introduction

Why a book on psychology for language teachers?

This book is the result of several years of collaboration between two colleagues from very different professional backgrounds; one of us comes from the field of applied linguistics while the other is an educational psychologist. Several years ago we began to explore, somewhat tentatively, a number of different areas of educational psychology and to consider the possible implications of these for language teachers. The initial results of this work generated for us a tremendous feeling of excitement and we began to realise its potential value to teachers of foreign languages. Out of this preliminary exploration grew an increasing number of lectures, seminars and conference papers as we tried out our ideas with professionals in different parts of the world.

To our surprise, the sense of discovery that this work had generated grew. The more we worked together with different groups of teachers around the world, the more our ideas took on new shapes and new meanings. After a while we found that we had aroused the interest of an increasing audience, many of whom encouraged us to put down our developing ideas in the form of a book.

Spurred on by the interest and encouragement of the teachers with whom we worked in various teaching contexts, we began to commit our ideas to paper. Thus this book was conceived, heralding the beginning of a lengthy process of incubation which was at times stormy, but always professionally stimulating and increasingly exciting.

As we wrote, our ideas continued to be reshaped, so that at the end of each chapter we felt the need to return to the previously completed chapters to revise and renew what we had written. This we have come to see as entirely appropriate, because it is an illustration in practice of exactly what we are writing about, the process of construction and reconstruction of meaning.

The literature on language teaching provides comprehensive accounts of different language teaching methodologies and is rich with ideas and techniques for teaching a language. However, what has become increasingly clear to us is the fundamental importance to teachers of an understanding of

what is involved in the process of learning to inform and underpin our teaching of the language. Teachers' own conceptions of what is meant by learning, and what affects learning will influence everything that they do in the classroom. At the same time, in order to make informed decisions in their day-to-day teaching, teachers need to be consciously aware of what their beliefs about learning and teaching are. These two principles underlie much of the content and format of this book.

What this book is about

This is a book *about* psychology *for* language teachers. It is not a book about language teaching *per se*; there are numerous volumes on this topic already on the market. Nor is it a book of tips for teachers, or another book about second language acquisition. It is a text that is principally about psychology. It aims to provide language teachers with an introduction to a number of key issues and recent developments in psychology that will help them to understand better the ways in which their learners learn and which will provide a fund of knowledge from which to draw to inform their classroom practices. We shall, where appropriate, provide examples to illustrate the application of the ideas presented to foreign-language classrooms. However, at the same time we would not want to be prescriptive about how to put these theories into practice as what is most appropriate will differ from one situation to another, from one teacher to another and from one learner to another. It would also contradict one of our fundamental beliefs that teachers will make their own sense of the ideas and theories with which they are presented in ways that are personal to them.

This book is different from many books on educational psychology which generally aim to provide a comprehensive survey of different psychological theories. Instead we take one particular psychological approach which we apply to a number of different issues in learning and teaching, such as motivation or task design. In many respects this approach owes a great deal to the humanist tradition in its emphasis upon the whole person and on the affective aspects of learning. However, because of the particular value that we place on recent cognitive theories, our approach is essentially *constructivist*. As we shall explain in detail later in the book, we understand by this that each individual constructs his or her own reality and therefore learns different things in very different ways even when provided with what seem to be very similar learning experiences.

At the same time, we have to face up to the fact that learning does not occur in a vacuum. We therefore need a framework within which our particular psychological perspective can operate effectively. The framework we have chosen is that of *social interactionism*, which we believe encompasses

the key elements of learning and education. As we see it, babies are born into social worlds, come to develop a concept of self as a result of their social interactions with others, and increasingly employ language to make sense of that social world and to help them play an effective part within it. Thus, an understanding of the social factors which play a part in our increasing competence as language users is essential for all language teachers.

There are a number of different areas that are currently of interest to language teachers which are directly related to and draw upon the field of psychology. An example is the area of learner training, which looks at how learners can be helped to acquire appropriate strategies for learning languages. This in turn involves an understanding of the cognitive and metacognitive strategies that learners bring to any learning task. Another example is the complex issue of motivation: what motivates learners to learn a language. A deeper understanding of recent views about why people are motivated to learn and of theories of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can assist the language teacher to a deeper understanding of the motivation of his or her own learners.

This book, then, aims to provide language teachers with a background to a number of topics in educational psychology which will assist them in their day-to-day practice in teaching a language. In addition to this, the book also aims to equip teachers with a means of viewing the teaching and learning situations within which they work in an informed and analytical way.

Who this book is for

This book is intended for teachers of a foreign language at primary, secondary or tertiary levels. The principles discussed are applicable to teachers of English as a foreign language, modern language teachers, or those involved in teaching any language whether in the UK or overseas. It is intended that it should be usable by teachers from a range of teaching contexts and cultural backgrounds.

The book will also be of interest to teacher trainers and anyone involved in teaching psychological aspects of language learning and teaching. Those involved in the management of teaching or teacher training organisations, such as head teachers or inspectors, whether in the UK or overseas, should also find this book of value. It will provide a source of information about such issues as establishing in the school an environment which is conducive to learning, the relationships between teachers and learners, and, most importantly, will help the reader to formulate his or her own view of what the process of educating is all about.

In addition, it is hoped that anyone involved in the education of children who is interested in language might find this book of interest. Whilst we

believe that the issues which we raise are of particular relevance to language teachers, it seems very clear to us also that their implications stretch far wider.

Overview of the book

Chapters 1 and 2 provide a brief introduction to the discipline of educational psychology and set the context in which this subject has grown. Important influences on the development of psychological ideas and theories related to the process of education will be described, and the relevance of these ideas to teaching and learning a foreign language will be discussed.

Following this, we present the interactionist perspective that will be adopted in this book. Four key aspects of the teaching/learning situation are identified; the *teacher*, the *learner*, the *task* and the *learning context*. These are seen as interacting with each other in a dynamic way. The rest of the book is organised around these four themes.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on what the *teacher* brings to the teaching/learning situation. In Chapter 3 teachers' views and perceptions of learning are discussed, while Chapter 4 considers what teachers can do to promote and facilitate learning in their learners. Chapters 5 to 7 consider what the *learner* brings to the teaching/learning situation. In these three chapters various themes that are pertinent to learners are discussed: the learner as an individual, motivation and how learners deal with the process of learning. Chapter 8 looks at *tasks*: the place of the task as the manifestation of teachers' beliefs and the interface between teacher and learners. Chapter 9 then deals with the broader issue of the *context* in which the learning takes place. Finally, Chapter 10 pulls together the issues discussed in the book.