guide to SLA and effective classroom instruction.

Iqbal Judge is a Professor in the PG Government College for Girls (PG GCG11), Chandigarh. She has over three decades of experience in teaching, with research interests in bilingualism, materials production and classroom dynamics.
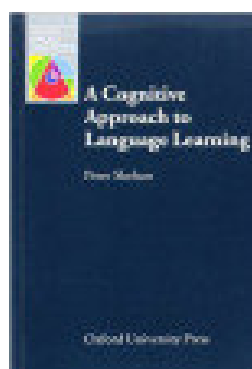
iqbaljudge_1@yahoo.co.in

A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning

Skehan, P. (1998).

Oxford University Press. (324 Pages).

ISBN 0194372170, 9780194372176

Reviewed by: *Achla M. Raina*

The book presents an integrated account of issues in second language learning and language pedagogy, bringing into sharp focus the language learner and the learning process. Of the many contributions that the book makes, the single most important is its conceptualization of language learning as a dual mode information processing that involves rules as well as exemplars. It is this theoretical perspective which underlies the forays that the author makes into the issues of cognitive basis of language learning, pedagogical intervention through instruction and assessment, and individual variation in language learning. The book articulates a nuanced approach to language acquisition and learning derived from a view of language as a complex interplay of rules and lists. The approach is, in turn, translated into a set of clearly defined pedagogical practices.

The book consists of twelve chapters and a general introduction. The twelve chapters can be grouped into three broad sections: (i) the theoretical approach presented in chapters 1-4, (ii) approaches to language instruction and assessment discussed in chapters 5-7, and (iii) relevance of individual variation in language pedagogy dealt with in chapters 8-11. Chapter 12 contains the concluding remarks.

Chapter 1 begins with counterpoising the comprehension based approaches to second language instruction and the interaction/ production based approaches. The claim that is sought to be built is that meaning-oriented instructional activities that bypass the form of language may induce the language learner to rely on strategies of communication. Chapter 2 questions the assumptions regarding the rule-based systems underlying communication and presents an alternative perspective which argues for a more substantive place for lexis in language than is usually accepted. Chapter 3 examines the processing models in language use and language learning. Three stages of information processing - input, central processing and output - are reviewed. For input, the concept of noticing is assumed to be central. The key factor in central processing is the existence of two representational systems - rule based and exemplar based. These representational systems are implicated in the output and the assumption that is made here is that it is the memory based system which is chosen over the rule based system where communicative pressure is paramount. Chapter 4 schematizes the models of second language learning based on questions that concern the nature of the underlying competence in each model, how the change occurs in the underlying system, how the system is used to enable real time performance, and how performance and developmental change relate to each other. A task-based approach to learning premised on a dual mode system that

combines rule-based and exemplar-based systems is proposed here.

Chapters 5-7 are concerned with a task-based pedagogical intervention in second language learning. The rationale for task-based instruction, as against a presentation-based approach, is built in chapter 5, and the past and ongoing research in this direction is extensively reviewed. Chapter 6 targets implementation of task-based instruction proposals. The chapter discusses two contrasting approaches to using tasks in instruction - structure oriented tasks and communicatively oriented tasks - with a distinct preference for an intermediate approach that can strike a balance between form and meaning. The chapter goes into a detailed discussion of how the known facts about task difficulty and selective effects of tasks, together with the effects of task implementation conditions can be brought to bear upon a productive balance between form and meaning. This balancing is shown to work at the level of individual tasks as well as sequences of tasks. Chapter 7 offers a processing perspective on the assessment of language ability. The chapter proposes strategic competence as a mediator between communicative competence, meaning intentions, context of situation, and knowledge of the world. Formulation of meaning, assessment of resources, planning and execution are characterized as meta-cognitive abilities which underlie the way competence is related to performance. The chapter proposes tasks as elicitation devices, with conditions stated for using tasks as tests. The methods of evaluating task-based performance are also discussed here.

Chapters 8-11 focus on the issue of how individual learners may differ from one another in language learning capacities. Chapter 8 is concerned with the cognitive dimension of individual differences, the language aptitude, integrating it with the information processing

approach to second language acquisition and learning. Aptitude is argued to be componential in nature and its different components are shown to relate to the different stages of the information processing model of language learning. Chapter 9 takes up the issues of modularity and critical period to second language learning, arguing that modularity cannot be conceptualized in isolation from the stages of processing. Thus while peripheral stages of input and output are argued to show the evidence of being different from general cognitive abilities, the central processing stage is claimed to have much in common with general processing abilities. Chapter 10 builds up the claim for a style based perspective on individual variation proposing it to be an area ripe for investigation. Chapter 11 takes up the issue of the role of the learner in language pedagogy, developing the view that the individual learner has been ignored too frequently and for too long, and undesirably so. The concluding chapter 12 revisits the issues of cognitive basis of language learning, the importance of dual coding and the tension between learning and performance.

The theoretical perspective that can be claimed to define the work under review is that the language module is a combination of rules and memory. An insightful parallel is sought to be drawn between first language acquisition and second language learning in terms of the dual coding approach which claims that both first and second language are learnt using a processing model that is rule-based as well as exemplar-based. In what appears to be a very timely departure from the dominant rule-based approaches in language pedagogy, the book argues for a pedagogical intervention that takes into account the exemplar as an important resource in the learning process. The theme of individual variation in learning, often considered undesirable by second language learning researchers for the complexity it can bring into syllabus design and testing, and by the theoretical

linguist for the threat it poses to the universalist accounts of language and learning, is brought emphatically into the discussion. Contesting the claims of invariance in first language acquisition research, the book upholds the view that there is variation in the rate, if not the route, of first language acquisition. Likewise, the undeniable evidence of failure in second language learning is taken to imply that individual variation is of paramount importance to second language learning theory as well as second language pedagogy. Again, language aptitude, usually thought to be relevant only in formal learning contexts in second language acquisition research, is shown to have a bearing on informal learning contexts as well.

The book revisits the contentious issue of language-cognition relationship towards the end and conceptualizes it as a two-phase relationship. The claim is that language and cognition are served by different modules or learning mechanisms during the critical period of acquisition/learning. After the critical period, the peripheral aspects (input processing and output/memory) continue to remain distinct from general cognition, while the central processing and general cognition are integrated into one system. According to this claim, what distinguishes the critical period as a window of opportunity in language acquisition and learning is the modularity of the language learning mechanism. The modularity is eventually lost to a general cognitive mechanism for learning even as the input and output stages remain dedicated to language. This claim has implications for second language learning theory as well as pedagogy, some of which merit further discussion. In particular, how and why does a modular mechanism dedicated to language integrate with a generalized cognitive mechanism in the post-critical period context? Why do the peripheral stages of input processing and output remain untouched by this shift? Again, what bearing does the shift have on the relative complexity of second language learning in the post-critical period learning contexts? Finally, in what ways can the task-based instruction and assessment approach address this significant shift in the learner abilities?

One of the most promising aspects of the book is that theorizing in linguistics and psychology underlies the discussion at all levels. Further, most issues are dealt with in terms of concrete evidence from first and second language acquisition research. Where the existing evidence is found to be inconclusive, the author takes sufficient care to outline questions for future research. These features of the book make it an important reference material for a language acquisition and learning researcher. The book will also appeal to the language teacher in its exposition of the task-based instruction and assessment in chapters 5-7, as well as the exploration of individual variation in language learning in chapters 8-11. As a whole, the book can be viewed as an important contribution to second language learning theory and language pedagogy.

Achla M. Raina is Professor of Linguistics in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur, Kanpur.

achla@iitk.ac.in