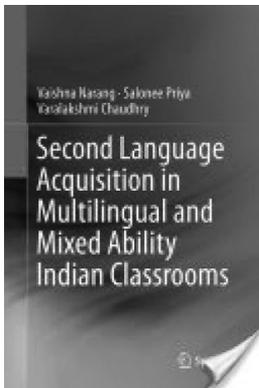# Book Reviews

Second Language Acquisition in Multilingual and Mixed Ability Indian Classrooms

Reviewed by Ravinder Gargesh

Narang, Vaishna, Priya, Salonee, & Chaudhary, Varalakshmi (2016). *Second language acquisition in multilingual and mixed ability Indian classrooms*. Springer India 2016, 233 pages

ISBN (Hardcover): 978-81-322-2603-1

ISBN (Softcover): 978-81-322-3797-6

In this volume, the authors attempt to bridge the gap between theoretical linguistics and the generalizations drawn by teacher-researchers who teach English in a multilingual, mixed ability, Indian classroom. They focus on processing the inputs provided in the context of classroom teaching/learning situation—an area which has not received the attention it deserves from linguists and language pedagogues in India. The book provides significant information about language processing and a fresh insight into its theoretical perspective by revisiting some key aspects of the theory of SLA.

The book consists of five chapters, a list of references and six appendices. Chapter 1 entitled "Second Language Acquisition Research on Spoken and Written Output", highlights the issues that have arisen through one of the authors' first-hand experience of teaching English communication skills in a multilingual, mixed ability class in India. Chapter 2, "Certain Theoretical Concepts in SLA Research on Speech and Writing", provides an overview of the work done in the area of SLA research. The authors discuss theoretical notions such as

Chomsky's famous distinction between "competence" and "performance", Krashen's "input hypothesis" and Swain's "comprehensible output". In Chapter 3, "Second Language Acquisition in Mixed ability Classrooms: Seminar Speech Task (SST)", the authors study the cognitive processes that take place in the minds of the multilingual Indian speaker in a mixed ability classroom. Chapter 4, entitled "Second Language Acquisition in Mixed Ability Classrooms: Written Text Performance Task (WTPT)", presents the results of a diagnostic test administered to a random selection of 32 students from the final year B. Tech (Biotechnology) course in an engineering college. Chapter 5, "Revisiting the Issues in Learner Language Research in Indian Mixed Ability Classrooms", is the concluding chapter. It consolidates the results of the two studies SST and WTPT within the input-intake-output framework, with a focus on learner language research in mixed ability classes in multilingual contexts.

Major insights from the work are:

1. Confirmation of Krashen's distinction between "acquisition and learning". Apart from the acquisition of grammatical forms, vocabulary and Indianisms, the authors make a plea for including memorization and rote learning in the learning process.

2. Teachers had largely evaluated communicative speeches for their coherence and incoherence of discourse and less for their accuracy of meaning (p. 180).

3. In writing, students who displayed highest and lowest "proficiency" levels had prioritized discourse structures over the number of idea units. In the case of "task performance", the highest scorers had prioritized errors, self-corrections, and creativity over script dependence. The lowest scorers on the other hand had prioritized discourse structure and self-corrections over errors, number of idea units, and creativity.

The general observation of the authors is that the degree of creativity, especially in speech, is an indication of the level of proficiency of a second language learner of English. They add that discourse structure and coherence is an indication of the input processing ability of a second language learner of English. Lastly, text input processing facilitates successful task performance, irrespective of the level of proficiency.

The present work is significant as the study, conducted in two parts, provides us with insights into three important areas of pedagogical practices and theory— tasks, skills and strategies. We know that tasks are designed by language teachers

to facilitate SLA in the classroom. Though plenty of research is available on form-focused and meaning-focused tasks, in the present work, the authors have narrowed the focus to two tasks, namely seminar speech task (SST) and written text performance task (WTPT). Both these tasks are useful for learners and teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) in India. SST helps to identify the learner process inputs at various levels, and the type of complex activity that precedes speaking before the class in the presence of teacher(s). WTPT is a convenient and comfortable task since the Indian learners appear to be good at giving written tests. Both SST and the WTPT require ESL learners and their teachers to pay attention to listening, speaking, reading, writing, evaluating, taking notes, making notes, skimming, scanning and other related skills. In addition to this, the English language teacher needs to be aware of the psychological, sociological and linguistic background of the learners, otherwise skill training may not be as effective.

It is known that learners develop their own strategies to tackle the difficulties that arise during the SLA process. The present study suggests interesting ways in which the ESL learners can strategize at every point in the learning process. For every task and activity given in the classroom, the learners do a lot of complicated processing according to their respective levels of proficiency in English, their levels of interest in the topic and in their individual choice of strategies while responding to input texts. An Indian ESL learner's processing is even more complex because of his/her multilingual and multicultural background.

This book, although significant, bases its findings on only two tasks, the seminar speech task and the written test and performance task. Moreover, the number of subjects for the study is also limited to 15 students for each task. More widespread data from a larger number of students from across the country would have led to more detailed and significant findings. Nonetheless, the book is a welcome step, for it provides a new direction to SLA research in India.

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