

Book reviews

Language, Autonomy and the New Learning Environments, Douglas Allford and Norbert Pachler. Bern: Peter Lang, 2007. 287 Pages. ISBN: 978-3-03-910567-0. Price: €58.40

This book comprises a series of largely independent essays linked together in a rather perfunctory way. A prefatory note informs us that the book's genesis "involved significant collaboration by the co-authors" but that each chapter has a single author. Douglas Allford wrote the introduction (Chapter 1), the conclusion (Chapter 9), three chapters on "language understanding" (2–4), and two chapters on "autonomous language learning" (5 and 6), while Norbert Pachler wrote two chapters on new learning environments (7 and 8). The introduction summarises the concerns and arguments of the three groups of chapters and the conclusion provides a recapitulation. This is not enough to compensate for the lack of an overarching argument, though it entails rather a lot of repetition.

In the first of the three chapters on "language understanding" Allford explains that this term is used to encompass three areas: mother tongue, second language(s), and the "new literacies" (p.35). He also tells us that it "implies more than being able to use language, although it certainly covers that too" (p.41). This is so contrary to the usual sense of "understanding" that it is unlikely to achieve widespread acceptance. The second "language understanding" chapter is concerned with how the mother tongue should be taught and the third with second and foreign languages. In both chapters Allford is centrally preoccupied with the development of learners' explicit mastery of linguistic form. He provides a useful overview of the many different ways in which this issue has been debated and delivers some telling criticisms, especially of Stephen Krashen's position. But his summaries of research findings are mostly rather general, so that readers not already familiar with the research in question may be left none the wiser. What is more, he gives few concrete examples to illustrate what the many different positions imply in terms of pedagogical practice. At a time of renewed international interest in the relation between mother tongue and foreign language teaching, it may be counted a limitation, especially in a book published in Switzerland, that the discussion of mother tongue teaching is entirely limited to the UK and its National Literacy Strategy.

Allford begins Chapter 5 by drawing attention to the many different definitions of autonomy, though it evidently did not occur to him to wonder whether "autonomous

language learning” (his preferred term) is synonymous with “learner autonomy”. He proposes to clear away some of the confusion by distinguishing between “radical” and “gradual” versions of autonomy. Unfortunately his distinction is based in part on a distortion of the literature he reviews. For example, he claims that one of the characteristics of the “radical” version is commitment to a “nativist” view of language learning, but this argument rests on misrepresentation of at least two sources. He associates Henri Holec’s *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning* (1981) with *The Threshold Level* (1975) – both documents were commissioned by the Council of Europe, then assumes that Holec rejects explicit grammar instruction because *The Threshold Level* does so (p.147). But contrary to one of the most persistent myths in the history of applied linguistics, *The Threshold Level* does not reject explicit grammar instruction; it is methodologically neutral, and quite explicitly so. My own argument that the target language should be the preferred medium of teaching and learning is also assumed to reflect a “nativist” position (p.195), though as a matter of fact I have always argued in favour of an explicit focus on linguistic form. Allford’s assumption to the contrary may be due to his own apparent belief that it is impossible to use the target language to focus on linguistic form, which in turn seems to be connected with his insistence that UK schools provide an acquisition-poor environment for language learning. In Chapter 6 Allford argues that in the UK autonomous language learning should be developed gradually. For reasons that he does not make clear, this argument is linked to the decline in the number of students taking specialist foreign language courses at UK universities. By this stage in the book it comes as no surprise that we are never told what a gradual approach to autonomous learning would look like in practice or how it would require teachers to behave in their classrooms.

The first of Norbert Pachler’s two chapters is concerned with technological advances and educational change. It begins by reviewing policy, again with a strong UK orientation, then introduces the concept of new literacies and discusses different types of new technology and their implications for society and education. The second chapter asks whether new technologies and new literacies herald a new paradigm for foreign language learning. Rehearsing learning theories that have already been summarised in Allford’s chapters, the discussion contains nothing new and signally fails to create explicit links with the earlier treatment of “language understanding” and autonomy.

There are signs of a failure of concentration in the book’s production. Several publications referred to in the text are missing from the list at the end; the formatting of the list is inconsistent – titles of books are sometimes printed in italics and sometimes not; and the authors manage to confuse G. A. Wells the historian of ideas with Gordon Wells the educational linguist.

At the end one is left wondering who exactly the book is intended for. Not researchers in the field, because almost by definition they will be familiar with the ground that is covered; not teachers, because the book has nothing concrete to say about practical pedagogy; and not policy makers, because the authors do not engage with policy issues in a sustained way, far less make clear policy proposals.

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