Book Review:
Let the Wars Continue: Comprehension Approaches to Language Teaching
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Books Reviewed:

Stephen Krashen. (1997). Foreign language education: The easy way. Culver City, CA: Language Education Associates. 62 pp.

Richard Day and Julian Bamford. (1998). Extensive reading in the second language classroom. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 238 pp.

Blaine Ray and Contee Seely. (1998). Fluency through TPR storytelling: Achieving real language acquisition in school. 2nd edition. Berkeley, CA: Command Performance Language Institute. 220 pp.

In scholarship, confrontation and disagreement are inevitable, part of the dialectic growth of a field as it lurches--or crawls--to some better understanding of the nature of the world. At times this disagreement can get somewhat heated, even nasty, stemming from fundamental differences in how data are or should be interpreted. The result is often called a "paradigm war," and no major field of study has been without one. In first language reading, a "war" has raged over how best to help emergent readers acquire literacy, with one camp championing a skills approach ("phonics") and another group arguing for a more holistic philosophy ("whole language"). In math, similar debates are conducted over "skills" versus "reasoning" approaches to pedagogy. In our own field of second language teaching, there has been a long-standing debate over the relative value of form-focused instruction, most typically dubbed "grammar."

Just as common as such wars are the calls to "end" them, pleas to "compromise" positions. The supposed beneficiaries of this truce are teachers, who, it is assumed, become confused and discouraged by all the academic bickering taking place among the parties to the pedagogical and intellectual argument. These calls for a truce are most often heard from those who--no coincidence--happen to be "winning" the war by their prominent placement on editorial boards and, often, public policy positions. This can be most clearly seen in the United States, where phonics advocates have recently trumpeted the glories of a "balanced" position to the teaching of reading as part of a one-sided compromise to the reading wars now 30 years in the making. No such compromise was offered by these skills advocates back in the early 1980's, when whole language enthusiasts ruled the day.

My own position is that there is nothing inherently wrong with a good, toughly fought paradigm war. Science does not advance by compromise. Legend has it that the Texas legislature once voted to "round off" the number "pi" to 3.14, an absurd but real danger of where intellectual "truces" can lead. Researchers should seek out truth (however unfashionable that claim sounds in our post-modern world), not warm fuzzies. Similarly, teachers are not stupid, and don't need dumbed-down versions of how language is acquired in order to make rational judgments. Experienced teachers know that learning is messy, and does not consist of clean-cut answers to complex problems.

In truth, the pedagogical wars in second language teaching have been rather one-sided of late. Form-focus proponents dominate the editorial boards of most major SLA journals, and there are only a few voices who rise up to oppose them. Still, those who have advocated that language acquisition takes place primarily and overwhelmingly through the reception of what Krashen has termed "comprehensible input" refuse to go away. And this is a good thing.

The three books reviewed here all, in some way, form part of a counter-assault on skills-based approaches in L2 teaching. This is not to say that their authors are all completely committed to an anti-skills position. Indeed, some of them have sympathy with form-focused approaches in some manifestation. But overall, they are practical guides on how to teach a second language through what has been called "comprehension-based" methods, teaching methods that emphasize the understanding of language as the key component in its acquisition.

While not the originator of this idea (James Asher and Harris Winitz preceeded him by more than a decade), University of Southern California linguist Stephen Krashen has been the most vocal and theoretically coherent proponent of comprehension-based teaching over the past three decades. His Foreign Language Teaching: The Easy Way (1997) is a slim but powerful primer for foreign language teachers interested in pursuing this approach. The book, a bare 62 pages long, contains a very brief (six page) summary of the author's "Input Hypothesis," followed by some guiding principles for setting up foreign language programs. Written especially for foreign language teachers, the book is free of obscure technical language, and is perhaps the most practical and accessible work by Krashen since the publication of his co-authored The Natural Approach (with Tracy Terrell) back in 1983. Chapter 2 of the four chapter book contains suggestions on what "Natural Approach" looks like at the intermediate level, a section on implementing "free voluntary reading," a discussion of the "authentic" versus "graded reader" issue, and several other such details. Also included in the short book are examinations of accent reduction, what to do when there are no native speakers around to serve as models for FL classes, and the problem of time in L2 teaching. For teachers interested in going beyond the basic information provided in Krashen's earlier publicatons, Foreign Language Teaching is an excellent, affordable, and very readable next step.

Despite its virtues, Krashen's latest work will leave most teachers wanting more "how-to" guidance. Two other recent volumes, Ray and Seely's Fluency Through TPR Storytelling (1998) and Day and Bramford's Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom, fill this gap nicely. Ray and Seely's book is aimed at teachers of beginning levels of a foreign or second language, and is a creative and potentially revolutionary extension of the ideas first promulgated by the father of comprehension-based teaching, James Asher. Asher, as most teachers know, was the creator of Total Physical Response, a teaching method that employs physical movement to present novel language to students in a low-anxiety, highly comprehensible environment. Ray and Seely have built upon Asher's ideas by centering the presentation of new language around a simple story. The teacher first presents the key terms in the story's vocabulary through traditional TPR techniques, followed by the telling of a story with the aide of simple drawings. The story adds a thematic and dramatic element to the lesson, increasing student interest and greatly expanding the possibilities of the approach beyond the very early stages of L2 instruction that most teachers associate with traditional TPR.

Ray and Seely leave nothing to chance, and provide a more than adequate explanation of how to set up "TPR Storytelling" in the FL classroom. They are not, it should be noted, opponents of grammar teaching, and even include a chapter specifically on that topic. Purist in comprehension-based teaching will need to make some modifications. A colleague and I have done just that, adapting Ray and Seely's ideas into something that we call the "Narrative Approach" (McQuillan & Tse, 1998). We found that the pre-teaching of the vocabulary via traditional TPR was more a distraction than a help, and the constant comprehension checking that is central to Ray and Seely's methods did nothing to aide language acquisition. I should point out that, true to our belief in open disagreement, the authors and I have publicly debated the issue (see Seely & Ray, 1999; McQuillan & Tse, 1999). All and all, however, I recommend this book for teachers looking for a fresh new way to approach beginning language teaching, with the caveats mentioned.

While TPR Storytelling will get teachers through their beginning levels, it is not by itself able to encompass intermediate and advanced EFL classes. For this, teachers interested in comprehension approaches should read Day and Bramford's excellent volume, Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom, part of the Cambridge Language Education Series edited by Jack Richards. Extensive reading has been part of the L2 field for a number of years, with a strong research track record dating back to at least the early 1980s, with Warwick Elley and Francis Mangubhai's pioneering work with EFL students in Fiji. Thanks in part to Elley's dedication, it has now spread across the EFL field to Singapore, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and many other countries, with astounding results. Essentially, extensive reading involves immersing students in large amounts of comprehensible texts, often (but not always) self-selected, allowing them to gain the full benefit of a language-rich context in the FL where local conditions might otherwise not allow. Day and Bramford succinctly outline the theoretical and research support for extensive reading, then devote the bulk of their book to the practical, hands-on aspects of setting up an extensive reading program in the classroom. The authors deal early on with possible objections to extensive reading, such as cost, organization, time considerations, the role of the teacher, and the more deeply-rooted skills approach to reading in EFL/ESL settings. Other thorny topics such as simplified versus authentic texts are also addressed, as is the case in Krashen's book. But what will be of most use to teachers is the section on the nitty-gritty aspects of the program: how to get started, what materials to use, how to set up an appropriate library, and the types of commercial books that work in extensive reading programs. Particular attention should be paid to Day and Bramford's chapter, "Building a Community of Readers," where they give suggestions on how to get students "on board" in an extensive reading program. As many who have tried some form of extensive reading in an L2 context can attest, one of the initial barriers to such an approach is often the students themselves. Coming from traditional grammar-based approaches, students often expect more direct teaching than extensive reading typically entails. This means the teacher must "win over" some students at first, and the authors provide useful tips to accomplish this task. Once exposed to extensive reading approaches, however, students are usually enthusiastic, as recent research suggests (Dupuy, 1997; McQuillan, 1994; Tse, 1996).

There are still exciting discoveries to be made in the world of L2 teaching. Healthy experimentation is the key to such discoveries, and vigorous, open debate of the

issues involved in L2 acquisition are critical to that spirit of innovation. These three books are products, in some way, of the on-going paradigm war in L2 education. In this case, the "war" has been a good thing, and I look forward to many more battles.

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