

Key Questions in Language Teaching

Innovative and evidence based, this introduction to the main concepts and issues in language teaching uses a “key questions” structure, enabling the reader to understand how these questions have been addressed by researchers previously, and how the findings inform language teaching practices. Grounded in research, theory, and empirical evidence, the textbook provides students, practitioners, and teachers with a complete introductory course in language teaching. Written in a clear and user-friendly style, and avoiding use of jargon, the book draws upon real-life teaching experiences and scenarios to provide practical advice. A glossary of key terms, questions for discussion, and further reading suggestions are included. The book is perfectly suited to language teaching modules on English Language, TESOL, and Applied Linguistics courses.

Alessandro G. Benati is Head of the English Department and Professor of English and Applied Linguistics at the American University of Sharjah. He is visiting and honorary professor at the University of York St. John and the University of Portsmouth.

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Alessandro G. Benati
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An Introduction

Alessandro G. Benati

American University of Sharjah



Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India
103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

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This book is dedicated to my dear wife
Bernadette, my daughter Grace, and
my son Francesco.

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Prologue

This book is composed of six main chapters (and one final evaluation chapter) raising questions about language teaching. (Chapter 1) What do we know about second language acquisition and what are the implications for language teaching? (Chapter 2) How has second language teaching methodology evolved over the years? (Chapter 3) What is the nature and role of communication and interactive tasks (speaking and writing)? (Chapter 4) What is the nature and role of listening, reading comprehension, and writing tasks? (Chapter 5) What is the nature and role of grammar, vocabulary, and corrective feedback? (Chapter 6) How do we carry out second language research? (Chapter 7) The book ends with an overall evaluation of the questions raised.

These main questions and other related questions are examined from the point of view that a good definition of communication is the expression, interpretation and negotiation of meaning for a purpose in a given context, and that language is abstract and complex and it is not learned like any other mental phenomenon. There is a difference between acquisition and language skills. There is a difference between acquiring a second language and developing a language-like behavior.

- In chapter one, some of the key and relevant questions addressed in second language research to investigate how acquisition happens will be presented with the main aim to extrapolate useful implications for language teaching and teachers. Some of the findings obtained in second language research have provided important insights in determining the key elements responsible for language acquisition. A better understanding of how acquisition happens and a better knowledge of the main second language acquisition constructs would push language teachers to question the prevailing methods and approaches in language teaching. A brief account of main contemporary theories in second language acquisition is also provided in this chapter.
- In chapter two, the reader is provided with a brief examination of the main current and past teaching methods and approaches in language teaching. For each of them, *the main principles* and *pedagogical procedures* will be presented. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the importance to go beyond specific language teaching methodologies and the necessity to develop an evidence and principle-based approach to language teaching. One that provides language teachers with a variety of “effective options” all grounded in theory and empirical evidence from second language research.
- In chapter three, it is argued that the main goal in language teaching is to ensure that language learners develop their communicative skills in the target language.

Communication is the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning for a purpose in a given context. The use of language tasks promotes acquisition and provides a purpose for language use. A task can also be used to achieve a specific lesson objective. Tasks (and not mechanical exercises or activities lacking meaning) should form the backbone of the language teaching curriculum. The nature and role of interactive speaking tasks (exchange-information tasks) is examined. The nature and role of language writing in second language teaching from a communicative perspective is also examined. Writing, like any other aspects of second language development, is about communication. In real life we write e-mails, notes, letters, grocery lists, reports, and essays, and these different tasks have a communicative purpose and a specific audience. A more communicative and task-based approach to the development of writing skills is proposed. In order to develop more effective tasks for developing writing skills, language instructors must clarify the communicative purpose of a written task and the target audience. Language teachers must integrate writing with other language skills and use more meaningful, realistic, and relevant writing tasks based on L2 learners' needs.

- In chapter four, input is defined as the language that L2 learners hear or see in a communicative context. Input is language that learners try to comprehend for the message contained in it. Language acquisition is input-dependent. The key issue in developing effective listening and reading comprehension tasks is to understand the nature and role of listening and reading in another language. General guidelines as to how to construct effective listening and reading comprehension tasks in the language classroom are presented. An interactive and communicative approach to teaching listening and reading skills is explained and proposed.
- In chapter five, the nature and role of grammar, vocabulary, and corrective feedback in second language learning and teaching are examined. Traditional grammar instruction (paradigms) and grammar practice (drills) are not an effective way to teach languages. Research and theory in second language acquisition provide valuable information about how grammar is learned and how different factors may impact on the effectiveness of different pedagogical interventions. These pedagogical interventions move from input (e.g., input enhancement, consciousness-raising tasks, input flood, structured input tasks) to output-based options (e.g. collaborative tasks, dictogloss, structured output tasks). The role of vocabulary is explored. Some vocabulary tasks are presented and an effective way to teach vocabulary is examined. In this chapter, the nature, types, and role of interactional modifications and corrective feedback in language learning and teaching is discussed. It is through negotiation of meaning that L2 learners not only resolve breakdown in communication and clarify somebody else's message, but also receive corrective feedback on the erroneous sentences. Corrective feedback is provided through different conversational techniques and negotiation strategies (e.g. clarification requests,

confirmation checks, prompts, elicitation, repetition, recasts) during interaction and classroom tasks. In the past thirty years, the key issues addressed by teachers and scholars, as far as error correction is concerned, are: Should errors be corrected? How should we correct errors? Is the difference in effectiveness of corrective feedback depending on the nature of the feedback itself?

- In chapter six, a minimal definition of second language research is provided. The main designs (e.g., Action Research, Experimental, Observation, Case Study, Psycholinguistics Methods) and procedures used in second language research are briefly presented. Research findings from classroom-based research could lead to a revision of how best we teach languages. The purpose of the chapter is to provide the novice readers and teachers with basic research tools to carry out their own research in the classroom.
- In chapter seven, an overall evaluation of the following key questions is provided:

What do we know about second language acquisition that is useful for language teachers and teaching?

Is there a particular language teaching method or approach better than others?

Is there a particular type of speaking task better than others?

Is there a particular type of writing interactive task better than others?

Is there a particular type of listening comprehension task better than others?

Is there a particular type of reading comprehension task better than others?

Is there a particular type of explicit information (rules explanation) better than others?

Is there a particular pedagogical intervention to grammar instruction more effective than others?

Is there a particular type of error correction better than others?

It is impossible for an introductory book of this kind to be exhaustive. The pedagogical interventions and language teaching options presented in this book are some of the options available to language teachers. The main objective of this book is to provide suggestions for language teaching which are grounded on research, theory, and empirical evidence.

The chapters are written for the novice reader, avoiding a scholarly style and tone and using a reader-friendly approach. The book is written for students and practitioners with no or little background in language teaching or language acquisition theory and research. Each chapter has the following common sections: Chapter overview; Exemplary Study; Recap; References and Readings; Discussion and Questions. The hope is that the book will serve as a basic introduction for the novice student and language teacher who is willing to reflect on some of the key issues in language learning and teaching.