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Book Review

Learning by Design and Second Language Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice By Gabriela C. Zapata

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Learning by Design and Second Language Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice

Gabriela C. Zapata

Gabriela C. Zapata's (2022) *Learning by Design and Second Language Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice* offers a timely and significant contribution to second language (L2) education by positioning the *Learning by Design (L-by-D)* framework (Kalantzis et al., 2005, 2016) as a bridge between multiliteracies theory and classroom practice. The book addresses a longstanding need for a pedagogical framework that integrates theory, research, and practical application, particularly in multimodal and transformative learning contexts. Structured into five chapters, the book moves logically from conceptual foundations to concrete pedagogical strategies, offering both theoretical insight and classroom-ready guidance. However, the book's emphasis on the general applicability of *Learning by Design (L-by-D)* might have been strengthened by a more explicit discussion of contextual factors—such as institutional constraints, teacher readiness, and local curriculum demands—that influence its implementation. While the framework is theoretically robust, its practical translation into diverse educational contexts remains an area requiring further empirical investigation.

In Chapter 1: Introduction to *Learning by Design*, Zapata situates *Learning by Design (L-by-D)* within the broader multiliteracies framework proposed by the New London Group (1996), emphasizing its reconceptualization of literacy as multimodal, socially situated, and identity-driven. She traces the evolution of *L-by-D* into a structured framework grounded in four knowledge processes: *Experiencing*, *Conceptualizing*, *Analyzing*, and *Applying* (Kalantzis et al., 2005; Cope & Kalantzis, 2015).

Zapata's discussion of *Experiencing the Known* and *Experiencing the New* underscores the importance of connecting learning to students' existing lifeworlds while expanding toward unfamiliar knowledge—a process reminiscent of Vygotskian scaffolding and Halliday's (1985) systemic functional linguistics (SFL). The chapter's strength lies in its articulation of learning as both a process of belonging and transformation, inviting educators to view knowledge construction as deeply relational and dynamic.

Integrating multimodal and social semiotic perspectives from Halliday (1985), Kress (1993), and Serafini (2014), Zapata demonstrates that meaning-making transcends linguistic forms. Her explanation of the five metafunctions of meaning—*reference*, *agency*, *structure*, *context*, and *interest* (Cope & Kalantzis, 2020)—broadens the analytical reach of SFL into digital and multimodal texts. This positioning of *Learning by Design* as a “grammar of

multimodal transposition” reflects current calls in applied linguistics for pedagogies that merge literacy, identity, and criticality.

In Chapter 2: *Learning by Design* and Second Language Education, Zapata situates *L-by-D* within the wider landscape of L2 education, highlighting its compatibility with communicative, task-based, and critical pedagogies. She argues that *L-by-D*'s epistemic moves naturally align with 21st-century competencies such as collaboration, critical thinking, and multimodal communication. One of the chapter's most valuable contributions lies in its engagement with social justice and critical approaches in language education. Moreover, Zapata connects *L-by-D* to critical pedagogy, illustrating how the model encourages learners to interrogate power relations and the representation of voices in texts.

Additionally, Zapata shows how learners can interpret authentic multimodal texts, engage in reflective interaction, and create meaningful linguistic and visual compositions by linking the interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational modes of communication (ACTFL, 2012) to *L-by-D*. Nonetheless, Zapata provides a clear framework for educators seeking to visualize learner-centered curriculum design through *L-by-D*. Therefore, this chapter persuasively operationalizes multiliteracies theory and *L-by-D* for L2 learning.

Despite its compelling theoretical synthesis, the chapter offers limited empirical evidence demonstrating how *L-by-D* has been implemented successfully in varied L2 classroom settings. Future research could explore how teachers apply *L-by-D* principles in local contexts where resources, assessment systems, or policy expectations may not align with this framework.

Chapter 3: *Learning by Design* and Second Language Teaching Practices represents the pedagogical heart of the book and excels in translating theory into pedagogical action. Zapata elaborates on *Learning by Design*'s reflexive pedagogy and its intersection with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles (UDL-IRN, 2011). This connection emphasizes inclusivity and accessibility, reinforcing the idea that effective instruction must respond to learners' diverse identities, abilities, and sociocultural contexts.

Furthermore, Zapata provides an array of practical strategies, including *pedagogical planning*, *instructional moves*, *collaborative learning*, and *assessment checkpoints*. These tangible resources help teachers link activities to specific epistemic moves. Her framing of teachers and learners as co-designers of knowledge echoes Cope and Kalantzis's (2015) conception of teachers as “designers” rather than mere transmitters of content. Moreover, the attention to formative and peer assessment underscores the multiliteracies emphasis on continuous, dialogic evaluation of meaning-making (Anstey & Bull, 2006).

Although the pedagogical illustrations are informative, some readers may find that these examples assume a degree of teacher expertise and institutional flexibility that may not always be achievable, particularly in exam-oriented or large-class settings. A more critical reflection on these contextual constraints would strengthen the book's practical applicability.

In Chapter 4: Genre- and Project-Based Instruction Grounded in *Learning by Design*, Zapata explores how *L-by-D* aligns with genre-based instruction (GBI) and project-based learning (PBL)—two approaches well established in second language research. Drawing on Hyland's (2014) work on genre pedagogy, she demonstrates how genre-based instruction supports learners in examining authentic texts for structure, audience, and purpose. Likewise, project-based learning is presented as a complementary model that situates language learning in authentic, collaborative, and meaningful tasks (PBLWorks, 2021).

In addition, Zapata effectively maps these pedagogical models onto the *L-by-D* framework, showing how learners progress from experiencing authentic input to applying conceptual understanding in multimodal projects. Moreover, the visual diagrams in this chapter clarify how *Learning by Design* (*L-by-D*) can scaffold complex project work while maintaining linguistic depth by illustrating the relationship between genre-based instruction, project-based learning, and *L-by-D*'s knowledge processes and metafunctions (Zapata, 2022, p.83 and p.86). Therefore, this chapter is particularly insightful for teacher educators and curriculum designers seeking to integrate multiliteracies principles into task-based learning environments. Rather than positioning *L-by-D* as an alternative pedagogy, Zapata frames it as an enabling meta-framework that unifies effective practices under a coherent design-oriented paradigm.

Nonetheless, the chapter could have elaborated further on how genre- and project-based designs might be adapted in contexts where multimodal production is limited by technological or curricular constraints. Without this contextual grounding, the otherwise coherent integration of frameworks may come across as somewhat abstract when viewed from a classroom perspective.

The final chapter, Chapter 5: Sample Second Language Tasks Grounded in *Learning by Design*, exemplifies the practical applications of *L-by-D* through a range of adaptable multimodal L2 tasks. Activities such as “Community Development: Talk to an Expert”, “Fan Fiction,” and “Podcasts and Vodcasts” guide learners through all four knowledge processes from understanding to production. These examples draw upon authentic, socially relevant contexts that promote collaboration, creativity, and critical reflection.

In addition, Zapata's inclusion of appendices featuring assessment templates, analytical frameworks, and digital tools greatly enhances the book's usability. Teachers are encouraged to evaluate multimodal compositions not only for linguistic accuracy, but also for creativity, criticality, and social meaning. Accordingly, this chapter underscores the transformative potential of *L-by-D* in promoting critical multiliteracies, helping learners interrogate meanings, represent identities, and act as designers of knowledge.

In conclusion, Zapata's (2022) volume makes a compelling case for adopting *Learning by Design* as a transformative pedagogical framework for 21st-century language education. By grounding L2 instruction in multimodal, critical, and socially situated practices, she redefines the learner's role as a meaning-maker and designer. Beyond L2 teaching, the book offers valuable conceptual and methodological tools for anyone investigating how multimodal meaning-making fosters linguistic, cultural, and critical literacies.

Despite these strengths, the book's limited engagement with localized classroom realities suggests that teachers and educators will need to critically adapt its principles to their own socio-educational environments. *L-by-D*'s transformative potential depends on how effectively its theoretical principles are integrated with contextual limitations, including institutional policy, assessment, and institutional support. Furthermore, the book would benefit from stronger empirical validation of its claims through classroom-based research demonstrating how *L-by-D* functions across diverse instructional contexts.

In sum, *Learning by Design and Second Language Teaching* stands out as a pivotal resource for language teachers and educators committed to equity, creativity, and transformation in language learning in a rapidly evolving digital world.

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