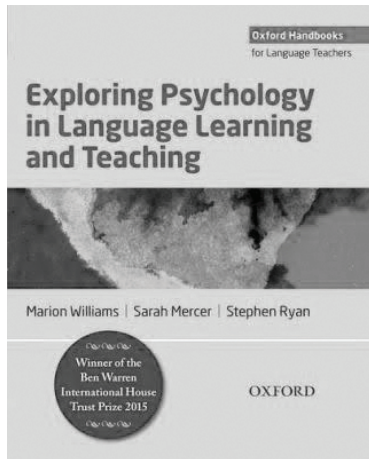


Book Review: Exploring Psychology in Language Learning and Teaching



(Written by Marion Williams, Sarah Mercer and Stephen Ryan)

Publisher: Oxford University Press, 2015

ISBN: 0194423999, 9780194423991

184 Pages

By Sureepong Phothongsunan

Teachers of foreign languages play a key role in shaping students' language learning experience and are in a challenging position, especially in this 21st century, to help students develop their potential to become successful language learners. One of the areas that language teachers as well as learners should pay attention to is psychological knowledge in language learning and teaching. Teachers and students who have an understanding of psychological features are likely to see how the process of language learning and teaching occurs, evolves and accomplishes. From a glance at the book title, *Exploring Psychology in Language Learning and Teaching*, it strikes my awareness of the importance of psychology these days in particular as a language teacher myself. This book overall is clearly written, using an uncomplicated but powerful choice of words to enable the reader with slight or even no background in psychology to grasp almost effortlessly. From my viewpoint, I would honestly recommend this book to anyone involved in language teaching and learning, be it language practitioners, teachers and students alike.

Exploring Psychology in Language Learning and Teaching, authored by Marion Williams, Sarah Mercer, and Stephen Ryan, comes in eight chapters. Each of the chapters focuses on different psychological notions necessary for real-life application. In the first chapter, important approaches of psychology, including behaviorism and cognitivism, are highlighted. Properly sequenced, other more current psychological approaches are also introduced after which the writer's views in relation to general psychology and language learning in particular for second and foreign language teachers are shared and contemplated.

According to Holliday (1994), what goes on within the classroom viewed as a community of practice is not only influenced by social factors within the wider educational institution but also by social, wider educational, political and economic factors that exist in a society. This can be directly related to the focus of the second chapter, grouping. What language teachers can achieve from having learners do group

work is proposed along with a discussion on the practicality and challenges of various forms of group structures.

The notion of ‘self’ becomes the core of the next chapter which shows how individuals create a form of self and a sense of self. The writers are able to tease out the intricacy embedded in the development of a sense of self and most importantly they provide recommendations on what teachers can do to create an environment useful for learners to build and sustain a positive sense of self.

Following is a keen explanation of beliefs in language learning and teaching as the authors point out their importance to language learning in the fourth chapter. A clear difference is made between belief and knowledge. Here beliefs are factors that appear to have an influence on learners’ behaviors and actions. According to the writers, beliefs are flexible and can change over time. There are also other factors which affect beliefs including contextual situations, and interactions with others. In fact, beliefs contain an emotional state and some people are emotionally attached to the beliefs. To support learning, it is advised that teachers should try to understand beliefs which learners have as well as the emotional importance of such beliefs. Certain characteristics of language beliefs in classrooms are also delineated for language learners and teachers.

The next chapter draws attention to affect, emotions, feelings and moods. All of these are considered important for learning a language. How emotion and affect are associated with language learning and teaching are also examined. Interestingly, the writers indicate that the most dominant affects in language learning are Krashen’s (1985) affective filter and anxiety commonly known as foreign language anxiety in connection with foreign language learning. Other less known features of emotions and feelings are further investigated.

In chapter six, motivation in language learning is discussed, clarifying behavioral views on motivation and cognitive theories of motivation with ample cases in point. The writers attempt to give advice to teachers regarding how to put these into practice in the language classrooms. The writers suggest that emotions should play a role in motivation as well since cognitive and behavioral theories are either incomplete or mutually exclusive. This chapter is very well-structured and easy to follow as it introduces the historical background of the major evolutions of motivation in the field of language learning. Moreover, both new and experienced teachers are given some useful ideas on motivation which they can use in their teaching practices.

The learner’s agency and self-regulation are elucidated in chapter seven. In the writers’ words, agency serves as a feeling that a person can act and control his/her action. Thus, it is important for learners to have a sense of agency to convince oneself that a language can be successfully learned. In relation to this, language learning

strategies are discussed along with their attributes and categorization. Learning styles are further explained since they are related to learning strategies. What follows is a discussion of self-regulation, defined as taking charge and manipulating own learning. It appears that teachers play an important role in helping learners to have self-regulation, involving setting goals which are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely. One aspect of self-regulation pinpointed by the writers is metacognition, which suggests a person's awareness of his/her cognitive developments in learning.

In the last chapter, an effort is made to analyze and put together various learning aspects presented earlier. It is a depiction of learning well-linked with psychological terms. How these factors come together to impact the learners and the teachers as a whole is offered. The writers also discuss some principles for effective classroom practice and aptly provide some suggestions to language teachers as to how they can reflect on and apply such concepts and knowledge to their pedagogy. This ending chapter in fact emphasizes a notion that learning varies from person to person and depends on a number of factors which come into play and that a universal format to make learners succeed in learning a second/foreign language does not exist. Thus, language teachers have to be aware of these psychological factors and their interplay.

Last but not least, not only did I find this book very beneficial, but I also had enjoyment in reading the texts using straightforward and lucid expressions. For pre-service language teachers, this book is highly advisable. For others interested in psychology of language teaching and learning, I am certain that their interests will be fulfilled. Personally, I would like to compliment the writers for their contribution to the fields of teacher education and language teaching. This award-winning book indeed shows the writers' proper analysis of psychological factors with specific, practical examples and constructive suggestions to language teachers.

References

- Holliday, A. (1994). *Appropriate Methodology and Social Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Krashen, S. D. (1985). *The input hypothesis: Issues and implications*. London: Longman