Book Reviews

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For more than two decades, the Children’s Language series has been publishing papers from the triennial meetings of the International Association for the Study of Child Language (IASCL). In this 11th volume, nine papers were selected from the 276 presentations at the seventh IASCL congress held in Istanbul, Turkey, in July 1996. Another group of seven papers, mostly on narrative development, which were presented at the same congress, were published in Volume 10 of this series by the same editors (Nelson, Aksu-Koç, & Johnson, 2001). At first glance, the title of this volume suggests that the theme that ties all the chapters together into a book is the study of children’s interaction in face-to-face conversations. However, with a closer look, the reader discovers that, although some studies analyze ways in which input (either linguistic or nonlinguistic) plays a role in the emergence of language, the approach adopted in most of the chapters presupposes that no single factor can explain the processes involved in child language development. Interaction is understood as the interplay of multiple factors that combine the linguistic, cognitive, affective, or biological features on which developing abilities in the domains of grammar and the lexicon depend; this results in a broad picture of how children develop language.

The book, which covers a great variety of research topics and methods, consists of a short preface, the editors’ introduction, and nine chapters, followed by an author and a subject index. The chapters vary with respect to the languages studied and the perspective adopted; some focus on monolingual acquisition and others on bilingual acquisition. The reader will find no difficulty in detecting certain thematic links, because five chapters deal with syntactic development (two with the development of complex sentences; two deal with subject–verb relations; two deal with aspects of mood and modality); and three chapters discuss the role of cognition, perception, or the use of gestures in language development. However, given that the research questions and the treatment of the data are so diverse, the reader may find that it is not easy to integrate the conclusions reached in the different chapters in order to grasp the book’s contribution to child language research. In their informative introduction, the editors offer a very useful summary of the chapters and address the problem of the diversity of topics by making an attempt to highlight the dominant theme: “how the child’s socioculturally influenced participation in discourse contributes in specific ways to learning language” (p. xi). In my view, four parallel themes surface throughout the entire book and are discussed recurrently:
1. the development of syntax, particularly complex structures;
2. cognitive and other factors that condition the child’s entry options to language structures;
3. the crosslinguistic study of language development, where the focus is on language typology as a determining factor in monolingual and bilingual children’s developing speech; and
4. the role of input in children’s emergent linguistic skills.

As mentioned before, syntactic development is a major concern in most chapters. In the first chapter, Aparici, Serrat, Capdevila, and Serra examine the development of complex sentences in Spanish and Catalan speaking children. The findings reported here belong to a larger project, whose results can be found in a recently published book authored by the same research team (Serra, Serrat, Solé, Bel, & Aparici, 2000). Aparici et al. adopt a functional perspective to show that the different types of complex sentences emerge gradually in mother–child spontaneous interaction. A total of 10 children (from 1 to 4 years of age) participated in this 3-year longitudinal study. The results indicate that complex sentences appear in a sequence: in the first stage (ages 2;4–2;9) object, coordinated, causal, relative, and purpose clauses emerge; in the second stage (ages 2;10–4;0) manner, conditional, and temporal clauses appear. Children at this age produce very few consecutive, concessive, or locative clauses. In the early stages, certain types of complex sentences (purpose, causal, and coordinated) are built on the adult’s previous utterance, whereas complex sentences containing conditional, manner, and temporal clauses are independent from the start. The child’s dependence on the input consists of relying on the adult’s immediately previous utterance by adding a subordinate or coordinate clause. This study takes a thorough look at the sequence in which coordinate and subordinate clauses gradually emerge in child language, highlighting the importance of cognitive capacities in the acquisition of these complex structures. The authors argue that the child’s selective attention to the formal aspects of the input is also due to cognitive factors, thus underscoring the role of the pragmatic and discourse features, which may also scaffold the production of complex sentences, particularly in utterances whose illocutionary force fits the interactive context (Pan & Snow, 1999).

In Chapter 2 Almgren and Barreña also focus on the development of syntax, but their purpose is to prove that the Basque–Spanish bilingual child develops two separate and independent grammatical systems. Given that Basque is an ergative language and Spanish is an accusative language, they differ considerably in how they mark certain syntactic relations, particularly S (intransitive subject), A (transitive subject), and O (object). The authors follow a bilingual child’s speech between the ages of 1;6 and 3;0, examining how the child marks syntactic relations in Spanish and in Basque and comparing this performance with the development of similar structures in monolingual children. No evidence of interference is found in the bilingual child’s emerging syntax. The bilingual child follows the same processes as Spanish and Basque monolingual children in marking syntactic relations in each language, thus confirming the authors’ hypothesis that the two grammars develop independently, especially when the
child has “balanced contact” with both languages. Although this is the only chapter that addresses the problem of bilingual language acquisition, other cross-linguistic studies (e.g., Chapter 1) compare monolingual children’s speech in two languages in order to determine the effect of language typology on language development.

This is the case of Chapter 3, in which Budwig, Stein, and O’Brien compare English and German monolingual children’s ability to use nonagent subjects in the early stages of syntactic development. Nonagent subjects can appear in active intransitive (The ambulance came.), middle (The jar broke.), or passive constructions (The jar was broken by the child.). Voice selection allows speakers to adopt distinct perspectives on events in ongoing discourse. Children are endowed with cognitive flexibility at an early age (Berman & Slobin, 1994), as they shift perspective on events by using nonagent subjects in active intransitive and middle constructions (between 1;8 and 2;8 years of age), and passives emerge later. The choice of these constructions is closely related to the situational context, namely, to the child’s ongoing activity. Thus, both groups use intransitive active constructions when they use language to create a new play frame. English speaking children use middle constructions mainly to talk about goal blocking situations (i.e., situations in which the objects do not conform to children’s intentions, as in the doors won’t open), while German monolingual children use middle construction to talk about norms (e.g., das gehölt dem Teller, “that belongs [with] the plate”). The conclusions reached in this chapter indicate that children are sensitive to culture-specific uses of linguistic forms (Berman & Slobin, 1994). This chapter shows the complexity of detecting meaning equivalences across languages, implying that crosslinguistic differences are not only confined to grammatical or semantic aspects but are also often related to subtle pragmatic uses.

The following two chapters discuss modality in children’s speech as a way of expressing the nonfactual or the unreal. In Chapter 5 Claudine Day examines the comprehension of modal verbs in French-speaking children between the ages of 6 and 12. The author places modality on the interpersonal dimension, suggesting that modalization concerns the relations between thought and language, on the one hand, and reflects the speaker’s involvement in the sentence, on the other. Her focus is on epistemic and deontic modality in expressions with pouvoir and devoir as she puts forth the hypothesis that epistemic and deontic meanings (likelihood and coercion, respectively) emerge gradually, according to their relative strength. In both epistemic and deontic uses, younger children distinguish first between the meanings of pouvoir and devoir, whereas older children only understand the meanings of the different forms in the indicative and conditional of each modal verb. Once again, the conclusion is that complex grammatical forms are mastered in a piecemeal fashion, this time from the perspective of comprehension. The findings of this study imply that the acquisition of modal verbs is not yet complete in 12-year-old children, drawing attention to the fact that more research needs to be done on later stages in language development.

In Chapter 4 Pérez-Leroux focuses on epistemic modality when she examines Spanish-speaking children’s use of the subjunctive mood in relative clauses elicited in a task situation. The 3- to 6-year-old children, who can all use the sub-
junctive in other contexts (i.e., purpose and embedded nominal clauses), select
the indicative or the subjunctive in the relative clause as they struggle with the
options regarding specificity and uncertainty offered in Spanish by the combina-
tion of the antecedent’s definiteness and mood selection in the relative clause.
The findings indicate that the appropriate mood selection in the relative clause
appears only after the child has developed a theory of mind, as evidenced by
the child’s performance on a false belief task (Wimmer & Perner, 1983). This
study raises interesting questions about the interrelations between cognitive and
language development, showing that the relation is bidirectional in the sense
that language can influence cognitive development and, at the same time, be
determined by it. It remains unclear, however, to what extent the false belief
task can mark a clear-cut difference between children who have acquired a
theory of mind and those who have not. In this study, a number of children who
had succeeded on only one of the two false belief tasks nonetheless scored high
on mood selection in the relative clause. Does this imply that theory of mind
develops gradually? If it does, is there a threshold level at which children be-
come capable of accessing possible worlds or come to represent the definiteness
and specificity of discourse referents?

Chapter 6 combines two major themes as Suzman highlights the importance
of cognitive principles and language typology in language acquisition, illustrat-
ing this with the emergence of gender morphemes in Zulu. Typologically, Zulu
has an overt gender system, marked by prefixes on the noun (controller gender)
and in agreement with inflectional markers on modifiers and on the verb (target
gender). Thus, the principle of “one form, one meaning” (called the No-Blur
Principle by Carstairs-McCarthy, 1994, whereby the options for interpreting
new forms are narrowed down for the learner) is not expected to apply in the
child’s learning of Zulu morphology. However, the findings of this study sug-
gest that Zulu children’s gender system differs qualitatively from the adults
because gender is marked less overtly in children’s speech because of the over-
generalizations of certain forms. As a result, the No-Blur Principle might apply
in the transition from the child’s partially covert gender system to the adult’s
overt system. The author concludes with an interesting discussion concerning
the role of discourse in the acquisition of Zulu morphology, stressing that it is
discourse, rather than the sentence, that facilitates the development of gender
inflections.

The second theme, interrelations between cognitive or perceptual factors and
language development, although recurrent in all chapters including the first five,
becomes the main focus in the remaining four chapters, where the question
addressed is which factors explain language development. In Chapter 7 Zukow-
Goldring shows how children make sense of the continuous speech flow and
start relating to ongoing events or perceptual information that surrounds them.
Within a social ecological realist approach, Zukow-Goldring explores lexical
development as a process of perceptual differentiation, whereby “people act to
perceive and perceive to act” (p. 143). In this study of Latino working class
families (children between 6 and 30 months), the researcher analyzed caregiving
practices in early mother–child interactions in order to explain how children
direct their attention and notice relevant objects, events, and relations in any
particular setting. The adult can help reach common understanding in the interaction by using gestures or by using more specific language, but “gestures speak louder than words” (p. 155), as they were found to be more successful in reaching practical consensus in mother–child interactions. The author suggests that Latino caregivers gesture more than Euro-American caregivers because of typological differences between Spanish and English. (Spanish is a verb-framed language whereas English is satellite framed; see Slobin, 1996.) By focusing on children’s developing perception and language comprehension, Zukow-Goldring stresses the importance of studying comprehension processes that lead into language production. These conclusions broaden our understanding of the “fine-tuning” of the input that becomes meaningful to children in the early stages by including body language as an important scaffolding feature.

In Chapter 9 Peltzer-Karpf and Zangl also explore the relations between visual skills and language development as they emphasize the dynamic interplay of brain and environment in several symbolic domains (visual perception, drawing, and language). They argue that a small set of genetic rules generate highly differentiated structures that determine the limits within which nonlinear dynamic systems are organized when living systems interact selectively with the environment. The researchers highlight the importance of nonlinguistic spatial understanding and language-specific aspects of semantic organization. The child relies on emerging gestalt principles to focus on frequent, transparent, and salient input signals, which function as “organizing points.” Thus, input selection depends not only on mental capacities but also on the configuration of the stimuli in the environment in which stable, salient, and continuous elements are favored.

In the same vein, Nelson, Welsh, Camarata, Tjus, and Heimann describe the Rare Event Transactional Model of Tricky Mix Conditions in Chapter 8. They explain ways in which the complex interrelations of cognitive, communicative, social, emotional, and self-esteem factors result in accelerated, normative, or delayed development during the dynamic interactions between the child and the environment. Certain conditions (the LEARN scheme) must be combined (into what the authors call a Tricky Mix) to enable any learning process:

1. Launching conditions: new challenges that children face in the communicative context.
2. Enhancing conditions: guided interactions, adult emotional availability, and children’s sense of connection to other children.
3. Adjustment conditions: ways in which the learner adjusts to the partner, the setting, and other variables.
4. Readiness conditions: the extent to which the child is prepared for new challenges and the degree of intactness of learning mechanisms.

The authors argue that when salient, transparent challenges, emotional support, and structural processing enhancers are combined into a positive Tricky Mix in several domains within the input, children achieve high levels of mastery.
It is interesting to note that the studies included in this book focus mostly on languages other than English. Four chapters examine data in Spanish; English data is analyzed explicitly in Chapter 3 only, where it is contrasted with German data. If we consider that these chapters are somewhat representative of the direction in which research in language development is headed, we might be moving away from English centered projects toward the analysis of other languages, particularly Spanish or other Romance languages (such as French or Catalan). The approach adopted in many articles is cross-linguistic, either focusing on monolingual children’s language development in two languages or comparing bilingual children with monolingual children’s speech. Further evidence of this contrastive approach is that one of the most cited researchers in the volume’s author index (if we exclude the contributors’ citations of their own work) is Slobin, whose crosslinguistic studies are widely known in the field of language development. Several chapters describe the gradual emergence of language forms, focusing on certain transitional structures, which eventually lead to adult-like language. A number of studies address the question of how children’s selective attention to ongoing events facilitates learning. The major strength of this book resides in the fact that it presents the reader with detailed analyses in which multiple variables from different domains are combined in the attempt to explain language development, shedding light on the complexity of the process. I feel that one of its weaknesses is that, despite the fact that the context and input are considered central to language development, in the overall picture of developing language, pragmatic and discourse factors do not come across as being as influential as cognitive factors. This book is hardly a beginner’s reader. It does not pretend to be an overview of the state of the art nor an introductory book to the field of language development. It is more oriented toward the experienced researcher, who will enjoy the in-depth analyses, detect the common ground in the diversity of topics and methods, and be able to extract the implications that can be applied to research in other areas of language development.

NOTE

1. In Chapter 1 Aparici et al. study bilingual and monolingual children’s speech without focusing on the crosslinguistic differences between Spanish and Catalan. (The assumption seems to be that these two languages follow exactly the same developmental path and that in bilingual children’s developing speech there is no interference between the two emerging grammatical systems; an assumption that appears to coincide with Almgren and Barrena’s hypothesis.) However, unlike Aparici et al., Almgren and Barrena detect crosslinguistic differences between their results and those of similar studies in English and French speaking children.

REFERENCES


This volume contains all 14 papers and three commentaries from the Recent Advances in the Generative Study of Second Language Acquisition Conference that was held in 1993 at MIT. Eleven of the papers address the acquisition of syntax. Of these, four focus on functional categories in second language (L2) acquisition. Vainikka and Young-Scholten propose that, although lexical categories or content phrases (NP, VP, AP, PP) transfer from the first language to the second, along with the headedness of those categories, functional categories or grammatical phrases (DP, IP, CP) do not. Using longitudinal data from Korean, Turkish, Italian, and Spanish learners of German, they suggest that learners begin by adopting a VP structure for the sentences in the L2 and then subsequently expand this into an underspecified finite phrase (FP), then an agreement phrase (AgrP), and finally a complementizer phrase (CP).

Taking Vainikka and Young-Scholten’s “minimal trees” hypothesis as a starting point, Schwartz and Flynn et al. argue for the opposite position, that all syntactic categories, including functional ones, transfer to the L2. Schwartz shows that Vainikka and Young-Scholten’s data is compatible with an “absolute influence” hypothesis, in which L2 learners employ functional categories from the start. For instance, she suggests that the verb forms that learners assume to be bare infinitives lacking agreement could also be taken to be inflected forms that simply have the incorrect morphophonological affixes. She also provides some methodological advantages to the absolute influence hypothesis, such as its ability to explain Romance speakers’ verb–adverb structures (e.g., “eats quickly the food”) as being due to transfer of verb raising from their first language to English; under the minimal trees hypothesis, the inflectional phrase (IP) to which the verb raises in these structures is assumed to not transfer to the L2, and hence it is predicted that such errors will not occur. Flynn et al. also critique Vainikka and Young-Scholten’s hypothesis, noting, for instance, that the proposed stages of their model overlap with one another, rather than being self-contained (e.g., the learners at the VP stage use some inflectional endings even though these are predicted not to develop until the subsequent FP stage). They then provide preliminary data from an elicited imitation task in which
low-intermediate Japanese learners of English were able to repeat sentences containing functional categories, which they take as evidence that the learners have such categories in their L2 grammar. Lakshmanan also argues for the transfer of functional categories, in this case for child second language learners. Using longitudinal data from nine children learning English, she argues that inflection and case marking are both present from the earliest stages in their grammars. She notes, for instance, that the verb be is present in their grammars early on, suggesting that they have an IP node. She also proposes that the preposition for that occurs in the verbless structures of one learner (e.g., “the boy for the cookies” for “the boy eats cookies”) is there to serve as case assigner for the object, thus satisfying the syntactic constraint that noun phrases be assigned a case.

Three chapters focus on the acquisition of movement constraints in English. Li and White and Juffs both tested Chinese learners on their knowledge of the subjacency constraint, which prohibits movement out of more than one clause or noun phrase at a time. Because Chinese does not exhibit overt movement in wh- questions, it is not subject to subjacency in this domain. Thus, if learners respect such a constraint in English, this suggests that they can tap directly into Universal Grammar (UG) because such knowledge could not have come from their L1. Li gave two groups of Chinese learners of English, one living in China and one living in the United States, a judgment task consisting of grammatical and ungrammatical wh- questions. Both groups performed above chance on the ungrammatical sentences, and the group living in the United States performed as well as a control group of native speakers on all but one subcategory. They also exhibited the same qualitative pattern as the native speakers, for instance, rejecting extractions from relative clauses, which are considered strong violations, more than extractions from wh- questions, which are considered weaker ones. Based on these results, she argues that L2 learners have access to UG and can achieve nativelike competence in the L2 if their proficiency is sufficient.

White and Juffs’ focus was on whether subjects who had learned an L2 in a classroom setting could acquire nativelike judgments from such exposure. Two groups of Chinese speakers, one living in China and one in Canada, were given a judgment task involving grammatical and ungrammatical extractions from English wh- questions. The group living in China performed comparably to the control group on most of the ungrammatical structures. At the same time, both L2 groups were slower than the native speakers at judging the sentences. White and Juffs concluded that classroom learners of a second language can access UG, although they may take longer than native speakers to retrieve the relevant knowledge.

Lillo-Martin investigated whether deaf signers of American Sign Language (ASL) would observe syntactic constraints when acquiring English as a second language. College students who had learned ASL natively were given English sentences to judge the tested knowledge of wh- questions and structure dependency. The subjects rejected the ungrammatical structures at higher rates than the grammatical structures and also rejected structures that were ungrammatical in English but yet would be allowed in ASL, such as wh- in situ questions.
Lillo-Martin concluded that their performance on such tasks was consistent with the hypothesis that they have access to UG.

Three chapters address the acquisition of binding in second language acquisition. Bennett and Progovac investigated whether speakers of Serbo-Croatian would transfer their L1 parameter setting regarding binding domains for reflexives to English. Whereas English has a morphologically complex reflexive him + self; Serbo-Croatian has a morphologically simple one sebi or self; this distinction manifests itself in complex NP structures like “John liked Mark’s picture of himself,” where English allows only the local NP Mark to serve as the antecedent of the reflexive and Serbo-Croatian allows the long-distance antecedent John as well. Results from picture identification and multiple choice comprehension tasks showed that the Serbo-Croatian speakers accepted long-distance antecedents in the complex NP structures more often than did the native speaker control group, thus suggesting that they had transferred their L1 setting to English. Moreover, the subjects were able to use such a setting to compute the grammaticality of structures not found in their L1, thus supporting the idea that UG remains available to L2 learners.

Yusa tested whether Japanese learners of English would exhibit knowledge of abstract, unconscious syntactic properties about binding of reflexives and null complementizers that they could not have been taught. Subjects were asked to judge the grammaticality of sentences containing reflexives and embedded clauses with or without complementizers like “that” present. Results showed that the subjects had knowledge of the subtle properties involved. For instance, over 70% judged structures like “He thinks it pleased her that articles about himself appeared in the paper,” to be grammatical and structures like “He thinks it bothered himself that articles about her appeared in the paper,” to be ungrammatical. In the Minimalist Program of Chomsky, the difference in grammaticality hinges on the assumption that two abstract movements occur at Logical Form (LF), the level of interpretation: the embedded clause replaces the expletive and the reflexive cliticizes to its predicate; when this happens, the reflexive is only in the domain of its antecedent in the first sentence. Because knowledge of this abstract movement is assumed to be unconscious, learners could not have been taught such information. The fact that they were sensitive to the difference in grammaticality of the structures led Yusa to conclude that second language learners have access to UG.

Christie and Lantolf tested whether L2 learners would acquire three properties as a unit that they assumed to be linked to the same reflexive parameter: the domain of binding (local vs. long distance), the antecedent (subject vs. object) and c-command. Although English and Spanish allow local binding with either subject or object antecedents, Chinese permits long-distance binding but only with subject antecedents. With this in mind, Spanish and Chinese learners of English and English learners of Spanish and Chinese were given a grammaticality judgment task that tested all three properties. Although the results showed an improvement by proficiency level, clustering of the three properties was not found. Christie and Lantolf assert that their results are inconclusive with respect to whether L2 learners have access to UG, perhaps because the cluster analysis
technique they used may not be refined enough to establish whether syntactic properties are related.

Also included in the section on binding is a chapter by Al-Kasey and Pérez-Leroux that investigated the acquisition of the pro-drop parameter with English learners of Spanish. Overt expletives and referential subjects are required in English, but null expletives are required in Spanish and null referential subjects are preferred when the referent is clear from the discourse. Subjects were asked to insert the correct pronominal form in 20 blanks in a Spanish passage (or $\emptyset$ if they thought no pronoun was required). The results showed a correlation between the two properties: The more null expletives were used, the more redundant referential pronouns were omitted. Based on this, Al-Kasey and Pérez-Leroux concluded that the two types of pronouns are, in fact, linked to one syntactic parameter, and that learners are able to access UG in order to reset it. At the end of each of the three syntactic sections of the book is a commentary chapter: one by Gair on functional categories, one by Martohardjono on movement constraints, and one by Thomas on the binding and pro-drop papers. Such commentaries serve to highlight salient points in the chapters in their respective sections and also includes the authors’ thoughts on the topics.

The final section of the volume consists of three chapters on the acquisition of phonology. Archibald proposes that learners set metrical parameters based on stress patterns of individual words and then generalize such findings to other words with the same properties, a learning principle known as lexical dependency. He also highlights his previous work on acquisition of metrical parameters; he found that Spanish, Polish, and Hungarian learners do, in fact, employ lexical dependency, transferring their L1 stress patterns to particular categories of words in the L2. For instance, his Hungarian learners applied different stress patterns to English nouns and verbs, showing that they were sensitive to the grammatical category of the words. Youssef and Mazurkewich report on a study testing acquisition of stress patterns and syllable structure by speakers of Cairene Egyptian Arabic learning English. Subjects were given production and perception tests with a series of words and sentences in English that employed different stress and syllable patterns. The subjects did better at producing and perceiving forms when the metrical parameter settings for the two languages were the same. They also exhibited evidence of transferring their L1 syllable structure to English, for instance, inserting an epenthetic vowel to break up double and triple consonant clusters not found in Arabic.

O’Neil proposes that historical data offer another way to look at changes in grammars. For instance, he suggests that the regular stress patterns that exist in Nicaraguan English (e.g., “babysitter” is pronounced with penultimate stress, “babysitter,” analogous to “televisión”) may have come about from L2 learners’ applying the stress rules of English across the board to all words in the language, including compounds and exceptions. He hypothesizes that the reason for this is because learners find it easier to set a parameter anew than to learn the exceptions to an existing rule.

Because the field of generative second language acquisition builds on current linguistic theory and such theory changes very rapidly, the concepts being presupposed in an experiment may change in a matter of a few years, as Yusa
notes at the end of his chapter, and new experiments on the topic may also appear, as Schwartz points out as true for the functional categories debate. Given this situation, it is thus unfortunate that it took 5 years for this volume of conference papers to appear, particularly because other conferences such as the Boston University Conference on Language Development are able to get their proceedings out in less than 6 months. In addition, the chapters by the nonnative speakers have not been corrected for syntactic errors. These issues aside, the volume provides a good overview of current research directions in generative second language acquisition. Second language researchers working within a generative framework will find the book a useful resource for getting up to date on specific topics, as well as on the field in general. Such a volume would be useful reading for a graduate seminar on generative second language acquisition, because it could provide students with primary readings on experimental L2 research that they could use as a springboard for their own experiments. Second language researchers working within other frameworks who wish to keep abreast of developments in the generative framework will also find this volume of interest.

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In traditional foreign-language classrooms, students are explicitly taught grammar and vocabulary. Language learners’ difficulties in conveying their messages in the target language, however, may relate to the development of interactional competence, which is achieved through interactions with peers and teachers within the classroom setting. Unfortunately, the importance of such pragmatic development is not always emphasized in traditional classrooms. To address this inadequacy, Amy Synder Ohta’s new book provides an introduction to the complex process of learning a second or foreign language (L2) in a classroom setting.

Grounded in Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocognitive theory, her book is made up of six chapters that address a range of issues pertaining to L2 learning. Chapter 1 presents an overview of the setting and the conceptual framework that the author has adopted to analyze the data collected, as well as transcription conventions. In this chapter, Ohta defines the notion of “private speech” as “oral language uttered not for communicative interaction with another, but for dialogue with the self” (p. 14). The development of “private speech” is critical in the Vygotskian sociocognitive framework, in which individualized (or intrapersonal) mental functions are considered to operate only later through the internalization of social–interactive processes with others.

The progression of Ohta’s discussion in later chapters is understandable and logical. In Chapter 2 she presents a further analysis of private speech and its role in classroom learning. Chapter 3 highlights the concept of assisted performance and considers the role of social interaction in L2 learning. In Chapter 4
she examines the effect of corrective feedback, on L2 learning and on first language (L1) acquisition. As will be explained later in this review, including L1 acquisition is one of the characteristic features of Ohta’s book. For instance, she explores patterns of recasts in L2 acquisition, although the term recast is generally used in L1 acquisition. (Note that recast means an adult response to a child’s utterance in which, maintaining the message content as it is, the adult rephrases or corrects the child’s grammar.) Ohta’s emphasis on interactional processes further continues into Chapter 5, in which she uses a longitudinal corpus to investigate the interactional competence of four first-year learners of Japanese.

The final chapter is the most practical one. In this chapter, changing the focus slightly, Ohta applies Vygotsky’s sociocognitive theory to language teaching. She poses pedagogical questions for classroom task analysis and evaluation, such as, “Is the task meaningful?” and “Do learners need to interact in the L2 in order to accomplish the task?” (p. 251). This shift in focus is interesting because different groups of researchers view L2 acquisition differently. The position Ohta adopts in Chapter 6, at least to some extent, reflects the position taken by foreign-language educators, whose vital concern is students’ progress in the target language. As mentioned at the very beginning of this review, the majority of foreign-language teachers consider that language learning is a conscious knowledge building process that includes learning grammar and rules. As a result, they tend to view students’ errors negatively. While discussing issues directly connected with foreign-language teaching, Ohta maintains her position that language proficiency develops through the process of internalizing the language of social interaction; this allows her book to maintain a unified perspective.

To illustrate these issues, Ohta adopts the position strongly associated with developmental psychology (e.g., recall her reference to recasts). Unlike foreign-language educators, developmental psychologists (i.e., child-language researchers) suggest that L2 acquisition is similar to L1 acquisition, as can be seen in the developmental errors committed by L1 and L2 learners alike and the similar order of acquisition between L1 and L2 learners. In other words, developmental psychologists tend to view children as active learners who generate hypotheses and try to organize what they experience into a system based on their knowledge about language. In this framework, language learning is a developmental process that involves a great deal of errors, which should be considered as a sign of reorganizing knowledge. Ohta’s position corresponds to that of child-language researchers; she regards adult L2 learners as active participants rather than passive observers of classroom activities, who test their own hypotheses about the target language, even if they fail to provide an audible answer or raise their hand (Chapter 2). Note that, although the term hypothesis testing generally refers to L2 learners forming a hypothesis about a target-language rule and testing it out to confirm or reject it, it was originally used in studies of L1 acquisition (Elliot, 1981; Snow, 1998). Because adult learners display similar patterns of acquisition to L1 learners, Ohta argues that similar processes of hypothesis testing and rule generation should operate for adult L2 learners as well.

Ohta’s position is reminiscent of the old L1 = L2 hypothesis, which was par-
particularly prevalent in the 1970s along with the development of Chomskyan linguistics. As can be easily inferred, researchers who adopt this position believe that the route of development in the L1 matches that of L2 acquisition. When discussing the process of L2 development, Ohta uses the terms *acquisition* and *learning* interchangeably. However, Ohta has intentionally chosen acquisition as the title of the book. Her choice, as a matter of fact, is emblematic of her goal, because it reflects her belief that the process of mastering an L2 should be similar to the ways in which children develop abilities in their L1.

However, it is interesting that Ohta entirely omits any reference to Chomskyan linguistics. Child-language researchers often try to determine whether an innate language acquisition capacity exits. Also, psycholinguists study L2 acquisition to test whether the notion of language universals applies to L2 acquisition. Although Ohta does not follow the path opened up by those influenced by Chomskyan linguistics, it is not oversight or negligence. Rather, while adopting the L1 = L2 position and modifying it to some extent, the author goes in the direction of social interaction, which is a more sociocognitive approach. Consider the effect of peer interaction on L2 learning, for instance. Chomskyan linguists might argue that L2 learners do not pick up their peers’ errors because the acquiring of language, including grammar and syntax, is innate. Instead, Ohta states: “It appears that, in these classrooms, the potential harm that might be caused by learners ‘picking up’ each other’s errors is far outweighed by the benefit of peer interaction” (p. 116). As a word of caution, although Ohta takes the L1 = L2 position, she is careful to remind the reader that L2 acquisition is not completely identical to L1 acquisition (Chapter 6). For example, when learners cannot find any equivalent words or expressions in the target language, they try to depend on their L1. Furthermore, Ohta argues that “for foreign language students, the L1 is an important element needed for thinking processes” (p. 236), once again highlighting the sociocognitive paradigm.

In fact, Ohta’s emphasis on Vygotsky’s sociocognitive theory makes her book distinct from other books of this kind. Ohta frequently refers to Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is the level at which learners can almost perform a task on their own through interpersonal supportive interactions provided by adults (or experts). The idea that learners are best able to absorb what they are developmentally ready to learn appears to be similar to what Krashen (1982) calls *comprehensible input* (i.e., input language that contains linguistic items that are slightly beyond the learner’s current linguistic competence). Krashen’s comprehensible input and Vygotsky’s ZPD differ conceptually however. Krashen’s comprehensible input is more or less based on a unidirectional interaction in which only one party (i.e., language teachers) constantly influences the other (i.e., language learners). In contrast, Vygotsky’s ZPD suggests that language learners and their environments (including teachers and peers) should be conceptualized as a dynamic system in which they actively interact with and influence each other. In this sense, Ohta’s omission of reference to Krashen’s comprehensible input is reasonable and moreover appropriate.

Ohta’s book has some weaknesses as well. For instance, the author provides a wealth of concrete examples to support her discussion. However, the treatment of the data – from transcription to coding and analysis – is not only a strength...
but also a weakness of the book. First, although a list of transcription conventions is provided in both Chapter 1 and the Appendix, the reader might not fully understand some symbols when reading actual transcripts presented in later chapters, such as timed pauses in approximate seconds indicated in parentheses. Second, some proper nouns (and nouns) are represented by using conventional English spellings, whereas others are presented phonetically, such as niu:yo:ku (New York) and bamku:ba (Vancouver). Such inconsistencies, which may have occurred because they were transcribed as they were actually uttered, can be distracting to the reader. Third, and above all, the reader might wonder why the author needed to include so many transcripts, perhaps even causing the reader to lose sight of the point under discussion. Thus, what appears to be a great potential resource might turn out to be just the opposite.

Despite such shortcomings that potentially hinder the reader’s comprehension of the author’s discussion, Ohta has successfully transformed collections of her sociocognitive research into a book and presents a promising view of L2 acquisition. To support her argument the author includes important notions, such as coconstruction among peers and teachers (the collaborative construction of sentences in conversation through which different individuals become cocreators of a turn at talk), as well as the three-turn interactional routine of initiation, response, and follow-up, which is often discussed in discourse analysis and pragmatic development. The book will be of special interest to those who are concerned with L2 acquisition, bilingualism, and even multiculturalism, whether they are foreign language teachers or researchers who are engaged in language and sociocognitive studies.

REFERENCES

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