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Review of Marysia Johnson's "A Philosophy of Second Language Acquisition"

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Marysia Johnson. *A Philosophy of Second Language Acquisition*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. 207p.

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Marysia Johnson presents a new framework to view SLA. In her philosophical approach, the primary goals of SLA are the investigation and explanation of the processes leading to the acquisition of voices that reflect real and local sociocultural contexts. She focuses on social contexts that create speech and speech that creates social contexts. Despite some researchers' efforts to acknowledge its importance, social context in existing SLA theories is considered superficial and abstract. Most current models of SLA make a clear distinction between linguistic competence (that is to say, knowledge of language) and linguistic performance (the use of language competence in real-life contexts). They focus primarily on the investigation of universal mental processes of second language competence, relegating linguistic performance to the peripheries of their research. This clear demarcation between learners' mental and social processes is avoided by the author, who advocates a shift in emphasis away from the preoccupation with language competence and toward the dialectical interaction between competence and performance.

Johnson proposes the study of second language acquisition in terms of performance. The origin of learning a second language is located not in the human brain but in locally bound interactions conducted in sociocultural settings. She examines dynamic relationships between the social plane and the individual plane, and the transformations of one plane into another. This approach is not new in the field; it can be traced back to the work of two Russian scholars of the twentieth century: Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975). These linguists expressed similar views regarding the role of society, culture, and institutions in the development of human cognition, and therefore, of language and communication. Based on combined perspectives of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (SCT) and Bakhtin's literary theory, Johnson develops her own philosophy.

On the other hand, *A Philosophy of Second Language Acquisition* criticizes the separateness between theoreticians and practitioners, and the false signal that one's contribution to understanding second language acquisition processes is insignificant, almost anecdotal, when one's research study does not include some sort of experiment and inferential statistics. Consequently, most teachers view themselves as powerless, facing controlling researchers whose abstract models and ideas they often consider impractical. Subsequently, there is a major gap between what theoreticians propose and what practitioners implement in real-life contexts. Johnson underlines the im-

portance of empowering teachers, with their experiences in teaching and testing, to the same level as SLA theoreticians. In Johnson's opinion, the separation between researchers and instructors is due to the theoretical cognitive model to which most SLA scholars adhere. As shown in Part One of the book, most important topics in SLA are discussed and explained following the cognitive scientific research tradition, which was adopted from sciences such as biology, chemistry, and above all cognitive psychology. In this tradition, the flow of information becomes unidirectional, from theory to practice; first, theoreticians develop new information, and then their research is put into practice in classrooms. Teachers are regarded as passive recipients, and their feedback as unnecessary or irrelevant.

One of the main goals of the book is to document the compartmentalization of hierarchy of power and control of knowledge in SLA in order to change this interaction. Johnson proposes a new model in which all participants have equal status, suggesting a major shift in SLA. Such a new system involves actively the collaboration of teachers, researchers, and students, and not necessarily within the cognitive model. In fact, Johnson believes that the cognitive theory does not solve the gap between SLA theory and practice. Instead, she brings up a new theoretical (and more democratic) framework that empowers all the parties involved, based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Bakhtin's dialogized heteroglossia.

Another goal of this volume is to analyze the shortcomings of current SLA models, which predominantly focus on linguistically based meaning-making and disregard social aspects of meaning-making. Based on cognitive and information-processing paradigms, current models of SLA are linear in nature: they go from input to intake to output; all the encoding and decoding takes place in the individual's mind. According to Johnson, these models promote a false belief in the existence of a unidimensional reality governed by principles and rules; once the speaker acquires these universal rules, he will be able to function fully in the target language. Far from these knowledge-based models, the author addresses the sociocultural context of performance relegating the human mind approach.

The book, divided into two parts (with nine chapters), distributes the two main purposes of the book: presenting Vygotsky's and Bakhtin's theories to create an alternative framework for SLA; and the analysis of current cognitive SLA models. Part One, nevertheless titled "Following the Cognitive Tradition," does not confirm the cognitive method but illustrates the strong bias of SLA models to advocate a new framework that would remedy this bias. In my opinion, chapter two contains the most useful information to the novice, as it provides a historical overview of SLA from its origins to Noam Chomsky's philosophy. In Part Two, "A Dialogical Approach to SLA," Johnson develops her guidelines, based on Vygotsky's and

Bakhtin's ideas for conducting, examining, and implementing research studies as well as teaching practices within this new framework of unified relations among researchers, teachers, and students.

There is no doubt that Johnson brings innovative and practical ideas to SLA research. Her democratic philosophy of empowering teachers' collaboration and students' involvement in SLA theory-building is sensible and coherent. Being a pedagogue myself, I agree with Johnson's perspective that we get lost in the theory of research, disregarding practice and performance in social settings. Those social aspects are fundamental to developing human thought, language, and communication. However, the author's criticism of the cognitive, knowledge-based method becomes radically controversial. In my opinion, this volume partially reflects the endless polemics of "nature versus nurture," discussed through centuries of philosophy. Johnson's model would be similar to Aristotle's *tabula rasa* notion. Language acquisition theories have shifted from the learner's external environment to the learner's internal processes; the environment versus the mental world. In sum, Johnson embraces a dialogical framework embedded in sociocultural contexts with many voices, those of teachers, students, researchers, and theoreticians.

Besides all the prolific SLA literature published in the U.S. during recent years, Marysia Johnson provides a practical and approachable way to understand SLA. Her book is a breath of fresh air in the field; its accessibility and its compendium of existing cognitive research make the text very valuable in this rapidly expanding discipline. *A Philosophy of Second Language Acquisition* is highly recommended not only to those students starting down this daunting path but also to the experts. ✱