

Key Issues in Language Teaching

JACK C. RICHARDS

Cambridge University Press, 2015

REVIEWED BY LE VAN CANH

The elevation of English to the status of an international language has brought with it the reconceptualisation of many traditional issues as well as the emergence of new insights in the language-teaching profession. All of these happened so quickly that busy practising teachers may find it hard to keep abreast of all the significant developments in the field. Luckily, Jack C. Richards, a notable scholar in applied linguistics, has helped to put everything together neatly in this weighty book of 826 pages. As the title suggests, the book provides the most up-to-date encyclopedic account of the central issues that are both historically grounded and recently emerging in the field of teaching English as a second or foreign language.

Those issues are organised in four main themes: 'English language teaching today', 'facilitating student learning', 'language and the four skills', and 'the teacher's environment'. Each main theme is discussed in one part; each part is composed of several chapters, addressing separate topics relevant to the theme. Throughout each chapter are reflective questions and vignettes provided by practising teachers in a variety of different educational settings. These questions and vignettes on the one hand, situate the topic in diverse contexts, and on the other, stimulate teachers-as-readers to examine their existing knowledge and beliefs. Chapters are followed by engaging discussion questions, which encourage teachers to reflect on their relevant experience so that the in-chapter ideas and teachers' hands-on experience become mutually informed. In addition, teachers can see how the ideas in the chapter are translated into practice through case studies, lesson plans, and textbook lessons appended to the chapter. The Glossary at the end of the book defines in an easy-to-understand manner the most common terminologies that are used throughout the book and also in professional discourse.

The first part – ‘English language teaching today’ – serves as a platform for the book as a whole. Readers can find an overview of the role of English as an international language and its pedagogical implications, as well as different theoretical traditions in second language learning including behaviourism, cognitivism, and sociocultural theory. This is followed by an account of various language teaching methods and approaches ranging from the oldest – Grammar-Translation – to the most current variations of the Communicative Approach such as Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT), Content-based Instruction (CBI), and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). The last chapter of this part (Chapter 4) explores what competencies, knowledge and skills every language teacher needs to acquire and how to acquire and develop them. One of these issues, which is the current concern in many countries, is the role of teachers’ target language proficiency as a component of teaching competence. In this regard, Richards raises two questions: (i) how much a language does a teacher need to know to be able to teach it effectively; and (ii) how does proficiency in a language interact with other aspects of teaching? (p. 113). His answer is, ‘Language proficiency is one component of teaching English, but it is only one factor involved’ (p. 113). The most important message carried by this part is that teachers need to constantly reconstruct their professional identity through their full engagement in exploring their own teaching practices and the belief system underlying those practices.

The second part is composed of four chapters centering on learner factors that influence language learning. The factors, which include beliefs about language learning, learning styles, motivation, identity, age, language aptitude, confidence and anxiety, are discussed holistically from both a cognitive and sociocultural perspective. For those who have been, or wish to be, advocates of learner-centered pedagogy, the chapters in this part are of great value. For example, teachers can find useful and practical guidelines on how to take into account learner factors in planning, delivering lessons and managing the classroom for greater impact on student learning. Similarly, in Chapter 8 they can find different course-design options for different groups of learners such as young learners, teenagers, and adults, as well as the principles for teaching these groups of learners.

The third part consists of eight chapters and focuses on issues related to the teaching and assessing of language systems (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, discourse and pragmatics) and the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). The chapters reflect how the pedagogical views on language systems and language skills develop over time, providing a solid ground on which the current views can rest. For example, the approaches to grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation are

developed out of the recent research findings of corpus linguistics, discourse analysis, conversation analysis, and the interrelationships between grammar and lexis, while the pedagogy of language skills is based on the sociocognitive theories of language learning. The lesson plans, which are prepared by real classroom teachers or teacher educators in diverse teaching settings and appended to each chapter, illustrate how the ideas presented in the chapter can be operationalised in the real classroom. While discourse and pragmatics – the two components of verbal communicative competence – are more often than not excluded in most second language teaching literature, these components are included in this volume. Richards states that understanding of discourse analysis and pragmatics helps teachers to ‘better prepare learners to become effective users of English as an international language’ (p. 545).

Since the 1990s, there has been a growing recognition of the demand for context-informed pedagogy in second language teaching to meet the diverse needs and contexts of language learners. Accordingly, teaching is no longer viewed as a self-contained activity that does not need to look much beyond itself. Instead, effective language teaching today is seen both as a pedagogical problem and an organisational one. In response to such a profound change, Part IV covers issues that focus on language teachers’ new roles as course and materials developers, classroom researchers, learning assessors, learner-based innovators, etc. Although I am not keen on the title of this part, ‘The teacher’s environment’, because it sounds rather ambiguous, I find the content really helpful to inform teachers’ development of effective context-specific pedagogy. In particular, Chapter 19 introduces a balanced view of both the upside and the dark side of technology in language teaching whether used to assist classroom teaching and learning, to bridge in-class learning with out-of-class learning (blended learning), or to complete a language learning course off-site. Teachers who are aiming for continuous improvement will find Chapter 21 on professional development strategies practical and motivating.

Richards writes in the Introduction that this book is intended ‘to provide teachers and teachers in training with a foundation of essential knowledge and skills to support their teaching and ongoing career development’ (p. xxii). No doubt, this goal has been satisfactorily achieved. If I could have one wish about the book, I would like to see one full chapter on teaching large and heterogeneous classes, which is a way of life in most EFL, and some ESL contexts. Regrettably, this issue is not adequately addressed in the book.

To conclude, *Key Issues in Language Teaching* is really a valuable asset. If you, either as a practising or prospective English language teacher, find yourself in an EFL book store having enough money for only one book, this is the book to buy.

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