

**Book Review**  
**Exploring Psychology in Language Learning**  
**and Teaching**

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**Exploring Psychology in Language Learning and Teaching**

Oxford Handbooks for Language Teachers, Oxford University Press

Marion Williams, Sarah Mercer and Stephen Ryan

ISBN 978 0 194423991

“Winner of Ben Warren International House Trust Prize, 2015”

This book, written by acknowledged experts in the field of psychology and language learning, is a welcomed addition to the EFL literature. Unlike many books in the field of EFL/TESOL which tend to focus on introducing new trends in teaching with little account of psychology, the aim of this book is to encourage language teachers to manage their classrooms with awareness of the feelings and sensitivities that different learners bring to the learning process. Major concepts of social and educational psychology related to language teaching and learning have been carefully selected and discussed in the eight chapters of the book, as follows.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the historical development of psychological theories that have influenced different teaching methodologies, ranging from the early positivist theories to more recent perspectives that take into consideration

ecological factors and complexity. They argue that different learners may respond differently to materials or resources and that we should understand the complexity of the educational context holistically.

Chapters 2 – 7 deal specifically with different aspects of language learning psychology in relation to the conceptual framework provided in the previous chapter. Chapter 2 discusses the significance of the *group* by highlighting the fact that each classroom is a unique group and that a ‘functioning group’ where members cooperate should be promoted. Yet, as acknowledged earlier, learners are in a complex system encircled by their family, school or class, or the local community and national culture, where ethnic or religious beliefs inevitably play important roles. The chapter addresses such issues as the differences between individualist and collectivist cultures; the language classroom as a community where a positive learning climate should be created; group dynamics; collaboration and cooperation in classrooms; and the relationship between group cohesion and achievement in language learning.

Chapter 3 focuses on the *self*. Four different conceptualizations of the self are considered: self-efficacy and L2 linguistic confidence, self-concept, self-esteem and identity. A person’s sense of self will be influenced by a range of factors: sociocultural factors; experiences of success and failures; internal comparisons of one’s own abilities across domains; feedback from others and how it is interpreted; social comparisons or comparing oneself to others; and self-driven behavioural styles. The chapter concludes by encouraging teachers to promote a healthy sense of self in learners to help them achieve their best learning outcomes.

Chapter 4 presents definitions of *beliefs* which affect classroom practice, and the relationship between beliefs and such factors as contexts, cultures, situations, interactions, emotion and time. The authors address beliefs concerned with knowing and learning (epistemological beliefs), explicit and implicit beliefs, mindsets, and attributions (beliefs about one’s own success and failure). The chapter ends with a caution that different teacher

and learner beliefs, both about classroom practice and about each other, are likely to cause difficulties and conflicts.

Chapter 5 involves *affect*, a humanistic concept often neglected by those focusing on cognitive or mental concepts. This term is used to cover emotional aspects of learning, including emotions, feelings, and moods. Teachers should be aware of their learners' emotional reactions, which can be negative or positive. Negative emotions such as anxiety can hinder learning, while positive emotions can enhance learning. To promote a supportive learning environment, teachers need to attend to what makes different learners happy, as they are unique and have diverse requirements.

Chapter 6 is concerned with *motivation* and covers the historical development of motivation theories starting from early behaviourist 'push and pull' theories to cognitive approaches such as expectancy-value theories, achievement theory, and goal-setting. Self-determination theory, emotions and context, are also discussed. The latter part of the chapter addresses motivation in foreign language learning ranging from the socio-educational model of the 1980s to more recent models, e.g. Williams and Burden's (1997), Dörnyei and Otto's (1998) and Ellis and Larsen-Freeman's (2006), which consider motivation as a process that is influenced by contexts. Dörnyei's well-known L2 Motivational Self System is discussed in detail. Finally the chapter focuses on motivation in the classroom and its relation to learner achievement, as well as teachers' motivation and their role in motivating learners.

Chapter 7, *Agency and Self-regulation*, deals with how learners can control their own learning through their use of learning strategies. The authors define agency as a learner's belief about being able to control and feel engaged with his or her own learning. Different types of language learning strategies are introduced, namely cognitive, social, compensation, affective and metacognitive types. Nevertheless, unhelpful strategies are also discussed. In terms of learning styles, teachers are encouraged to understand learner style preferences (Oxford 2003). It is argued

that learners need to learn to regulate their own learning by setting their own goals, choosing their own strategies, monitoring their own performances, and planning their own learning..

Chapter 8, the final chapter, pulls together all the concepts discussed so far and suggests that teachers think holistically about learner psychology. The authors illustrate this by looking at learners' willingness to communicate in the target language (WTC). They also propose eight valuable principles for classroom practice that reflect the psychological concepts influencing language learning discussed in Chapters 2-7.

There are a number of reasons why I highly recommended this book. First, the authors have succeeded in making theoretical concepts reader-friendly, even for those with no previous background knowledge of psychology. Other strengths of the book which have contributed to it winning a major prize in the UK include: 1) suggestions of related work on each topic for readers to explore; 2) questions for readers to reflect on their own classroom practice at the end of each chapter; and 3) a number of activities that prompt readers to think about cases, scenarios or real-life data, to create lessons, to solve classroom problems, and to examine what is in the minds of their learners. Many of these activities are photocopiable, and therefore are suitable for use in training courses or workshops.

This book is therefore not only a valuable handbook for in-service language teachers, but it will also serve as a useful resource for pre-service teachers, postgraduate students of applied linguistics, and professional researchers interested in evolving issues in the field of educational psychology and language teaching and learning. I strongly recommend it.

**The Reviewer**

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