

Book Review

Harmer, J. (2012). *Essential Teacher Knowledge: Core Concepts in English Language Teaching*. Pearson Longman.

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The existence of a gap between theory and practice in every field of knowledge is commonly known and often debated. This gap has particularly been a matter of discussion and sometimes complaint in the field of language teaching in recent years. "During the past 15 years there has generally been a move away from attempts to apply theoretical models of language to issues in second language (L2) pedagogy" (Tyler, 2008, p. 456). Theoreticians and practitioners have continually gone their separate ways, without as much learning from each other as expected.

A bridge of reconciliation and interrelation between these two ends has to be constructed in all fields of knowledge. Second language acquisition (SLA) theoreticians and second/foreign language teachers are clearly no exception to this observed generalization. Teachers inside classrooms should be trained to teach in line with and according to the most recent findings of researchers of the field. They should avoid teaching based on their own personally crafted heresy-like techniques or methods, which is often the case.

The writer of this paper has for many years trained teachers and observed classrooms as a professional career. In the arena of the classroom, teachers, as witnessed, take ridiculously unbelievable actions to teach a grammar point. They go out of their way, stretch themselves too thin, and do outrageous things and call it modern teaching! Most of these bizarre actions and performances (as often seen in the so called professional teachers' classes) do not have roots in any science, let alone language teaching. Once one of these teaching old timers was asked, "why did you use a football to teach imperatives?" The response was more shocking than the technique itself, "I wanted them to learn in a new way!" What exactly this instructor meant by 'new way' is a mystery, but one thing is certain: Teachers ought to be trained by textbooks that are informed by the most current debates of SLA.

The mark of a standard teacher training book, in the first place, is that it should clearly define the subject matter of teaching: English. English is a subject as much as physics is. Therefore, it must be properly defined. The textbook should clarify what aspects of the language should be focused on, and what kind of classroom activity is most appropriate for the activation of learning or acquisition. These are not easy considerations. Over the years, different experts attempted to define these parameters, each in a different way. A standard teacher training textbook will be able to persuade teachers to realize what English is as subject matter, what components of the knowledge of language, and what language skills should be taught in the class. It should also convince the teachers how to teach these things in terms of appropriate activities.

A worthy language teacher training textbook can also restrict heresies committed by teachers in the classrooms to creative techniques, which are in keeping with the much-written-about ideas and concepts in SLA. From such sources, teachers learn the principles of teaching. They also learn that these principles are red lines, which must not be crossed, ignored, or bent.

Moreover, a comprehensive guide book to language teaching can synchronize teachers to the direction of research findings. The remnants of grammar translation method or audiolingualism can still be traced in numerous parts of the world as the lead methodologies used to teach language to learners because the decision makers involved in the educational systems have not read or had access to such inclusive manuals. A source handbook on language teaching can iron out old beliefs and bring about homogeneity to the work of all teachers in the classrooms.

Another significance of a good guidebook on teacher training is its influence on teacher quality. Teacher quality is an essential predictor of gains in student achievement. There are a number of predictors of teacher quality, e.g. class size, certification, type of qualification, degrees earned, or years of experience. One indicator of teacher quality is the pedagogical knowledge of teachers, which refers to the specialized knowledge of teachers. This knowledge helps teachers to create effective teaching and learning environments for all students. The source of this essential knowledge can be a carefully authored teacher training book, informed by the most recent developments and findings in the field of teaching.

One popular textbook on teacher training is the one being critically reviewed in this paper, *Essential Teacher Knowledge* by Jeremy Harmer. This is one out of many textbooks, written with the purpose of preparing modern teachers, whose teaching routines reflect the contemporary underlying theories of language teaching. This book should be analyzed to see if its content resonates with the latest theories related to language teaching and if it has the potential to fulfill the advantages discussed above.

The content of the said textbook is used worldwide to shape the way teachers teach English (or any other language) to learners. The author of the book has consciously or unconsciously come to influence how language is taught in the classrooms all around the globe. The purpose of this critical book review, thus, is to see if this source book is

well informed by the currently often-argued hypotheses among SLA researchers, namely, Input Hypothesis by Krashen (1985), Interaction Hypothesis by Long (1980), and Output Hypothesis by Swain (1985, 1995). It is worth noting that these are but only few of the important topics, frequently researched, in the field; however, as space on this paper is limited, only these three will be the criteria against which the book is evaluated. Before anything, a brief discussion of each of the three theories mentioned above is in order so that the evaluating criteria will become clear to the readers.

Krashen is the first researcher who formed a theoretical model of second language acquisition. He has five hypotheses in the model, fourth of which is Input Hypothesis, with four components:

- 1) Learners must be focused on comprehensible input (meaning) rather than on grammatical structures (form).
- 2) If a learner's level in a second language is i , he/she can move to an $i+1$ level only by being exposed to comprehensible input containing $i+1$ (Krashen, 1985) or put differently, $i+$ a little more.
- 3) If input is sufficient, it will automatically include $i+1$, so one does not have to deliberately program the input.
- 4) Speaking cannot be taught directly; it emerges and becomes more accurate over time provided sufficient input is provided.

As mentioned before, Krashen was the first to speak about SLA in terms of a unified theory, and out of the criticism on his work, the other hypotheses came to be. A textbook informed by this theory should indeed discourage teachers from sheer focus on grammar teaching; examining the irregularity of simple past, formulating rules about the use of articles, and teaching complex facts about the target language, e.g. uses of present perfect, is not language teaching, but rather is linguistics.

Based on the first component of the Input Hypothesis, if a teacher intends to teach, say, simple past, he/she should begin by creating a meaningful context. For instance, a talk about the events of yesterday is a good way to go. In this context, students hear a story about their teacher's activities yesterday, which is literally the input ($i+1$). Then with the help of the teacher, they work out the meaning of this new structure. Finally, the teacher wraps up by making sure learners know how to figure out the form of the new target language by drawing students' attention to the way simple past is constructed in English. This is what Krashen intended to express when he talked about 'focusing learners on comprehensible input rather than form.'

The only instance in which the teaching of grammatical points can be useful in language acquisition (and proficiency) is when the students are interested in the subject (say, a lesson in psychology about the impact of our past habits on our future decisions) and the target language (let us say English) is used as a medium of instruction. For instance, when students are curious about the use of 'used to' employed in the text,, the

teacher can get the students to talk about their past habits using this structure and then break down the form of this target language explicitly so that students will both learn and acquire it.

A textbook on language teacher training informed by this theory should also talk about the importance of teacher-talk and its quantity and quality in the classroom. The teacher-talk is one of the things which meets the requirements for comprehensible input ($i+1$), and perhaps with students' participation, engagement, and involvement, the classroom becomes an environment suitable for acquisition, ensuring in this way that each learner will receive some ' $i + 1$ ' input that is appropriate for his/her current stage of linguistic competence.

Right after Krashen, came Long with his Interaction Hypothesis. To him, Krashen was good, but a unified theory of SLA needed a little more: interaction. As Long puts it, "... the more the input was queried, recycled and paraphrased, to increase its comprehensibility, the greater its potential usefulness as input, because it should become increasingly well-targeted to the particular developmental needs of the individual learner" (Long, 1996, pp. 413-468). His hypothesis outlined that

- 1) Linguistic adjustments promote comprehensible input.
- 2) Comprehensible input promotes acquisition.
- 3) Therefore, linguistic adjustments promote acquisition.

By linguistic adjustments, Long, meant conversational tactics e.g. repetition, confirmation checks, clarification request, etc., which would bring about negotiation of meaning, comprehension, and finally acquisition, but not always, according to criticisms. In other words, negotiation of meaning occurs when there is a breakdown in communication. Upon occurrence, the learner, in trying to overcome the halt, will say something that the other learner does not understand; the learners will subsequently use various communicative strategies to help the interaction progress and move forward.

Although this theory has been criticized, it has permeated the field of second language teaching and is a prevalent matter of discussion. Any book on teacher training should, to an extent, include this theory implicitly or explicitly. The observed reality is that students in the stream of the learning will face conversation breakdowns and they will try to overpass them one way or another, consciously or unconsciously, knowingly or unknowingly. Therefore, the mark of a good teacher training handbook can be a chapter where these matters are discussed. For instance, learners have to learn the metacognitive strategy of clarification request and use them appropriately and effectively when they have a hard time to progress a conversation with their partners.

In rethinking of his hypothesis, Long, realized that he needed to recognize learner's limitations, e.g. intake capacity and focus abilities. He hypothesized that if there was going to be a negotiation of meaning, it had to be done when these capacities were

available in students. If these mental resources were not available, students would not be able to focus their attention, meaning their attention in an interaction may be too scattered for them to realize the difference between their knowledge of the target language and the reality of what they are hearing. Focusing attention requires a great deal of energy. Without this energy, there will be little to no intake capacity. Another use of this attention is that learners may have to focus their mental energy on a part of the target language of which they are not yet aware.

A good handbook on teacher training accounts for these important issues as well. Teachers should be strongly advised to grab students' attention before they start a new lesson on a new target language. It may sound easy on paper, but attracting attention of a group of adult learners is not as easy as it sounds, according to anecdotal evidence from experienced teachers. Adults have busy lives these days. When they come to class, they may bring their problems with them. For this reason, they may look at the teacher and be physically present, but their minds are somewhere else. It takes training to bring back students to the reality. This is one example of how important it is for a book of this type to be informed of Long's theory.

Long, also, talked about and encouraged negative feedback especially in vocabulary, morphology, and syntax. Interactions in the classrooms frequently result in receiving of negative evidence on the part of participants. That is, if a learner says something that his/her partner does not understand, the partner negotiates the meaning and after that he/she may model the correct language form to the mistaken learner. In doing this, learners can receive feedback on their production and on grammar that they have not yet mastered fully or at all.

A chapter on negative feedback can be crucial to a teacher training course book. This particular chapter should talk about peer correction as well as teacher correction. Both of these are equally important because teachers are not always at the one end of an interaction with students. Classes can be crowded and not all students will have the chance to talk to the teacher. Therefore, they have to talk to each other in group, and correct each other. This correction should be the topic of discussion in a book like this.

With regards to Output Hypothesis by Swain, most theoreticians and practitioners at the time had come to agree that output was necessary to increase fluency; however, Swain believed that interaction did more than that; Output modifies interlanguage. Output according to Output Hypothesis results in the following:

- 1) It results in consciousness-raising when a learner notices a gap in the input, which can be a new target language, yet to be learned.
- 2) It induces hypothesis testing in a learner; the new target language is tried in several situations to see how it can be used correctly.
- 3) Metalinguistically speaking, learners through their output, self-hear, self-analyze, and self-modify their interlanguage.

Jeremy Harmer has taught English in Mexico and the UK, and has trained teachers around the world. He is the author of the highly acclaimed *Essential Teacher Knowledge*, which is the sole focus of this paper. He is considered an authority in the field of language teaching and his books are popularly used all around the world.

From a textbook which is designed to tell teachers what to do (or not to do), it is expected to reflect implicitly or explicitly the hypotheses discussed above. After all, these are the most debated theories in SLA about which many a paper has been written and many a lecture, given all around the world. Moreover, these hypotheses are derived from the teaching experiences of those who developed the theories, from the realities of the classroom, and from the gap between theory and practice. These theories were developed in an attempt to fill the gap between theory and knowledge. This is the task the current paper has embarked upon, to see the extent to which the book *Essential Teacher Knowledge* by Jeremy Harmer reflects the present-day thinking of researchers in the field.

This book is written in eight sections (A-G) and 110 units. Section A (units 1-34) concerns, according to Jeremy, four main areas of language, namely, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and finally text and discourse. This chapter is the most important part of a teacher's job as it directly deals with what teachers always worry about. They are always asking questions about the grammar lessons such as "what is tense, or aspect?" This chapter basically answers almost all the similar questions a novice or an experienced teacher may have about the meaning and form of a grammar point. Section B (35 to 43) provides a background to language teaching methodology in a non-technical easy-to-follow prose. No special knowledge of theories of language teaching is assumed on the part of the teachers (readers); however, the points covered in this section are what every language teacher ought to add to their teacher knowledge so they can perform wisely in diverse situations. Section C (44-64) is the heart of the book, where the realities of the teaching in the classroom are discussed. In this section, teachers learn how to teach different grammar lessons and language skills. Therefore, the degree of the reflection of the three theories discussed above in this chapter is expected to be rather higher in comparison with other sections of the book. Sections D to F (65-101) are about the other important details of teaching in the classroom. These sections in no way confuse a novice teacher who is on the cusp of starting as a language teacher. In these sections key things such as how to manage a class or how to assess students are discussed. The last section, G (units 102-110) is about a rather new area in language teaching: Content and Language Integrated Learning, which has not probably been experienced by the majority of the books' audience, yet it is there probably to help its few users around the globe.

The title of the book *Essential Teacher Knowledge* implies that the content of this book is fundamental knowledge, something that a teacher must know, otherwise what the teacher does is not teaching. The fact that the author claims the information is essential also implies that the content encompasses the basics of all there is (in the form of hypotheses and research findings) by the time the book was published. This implicit

assumption hidden under the title was the basis of the motivation sparks that ignited this paper. The logic of this paper is simple: if the said textbook covers the essentiality of teaching knowledge that a teacher must know, then it should reflect the most pondered-hypotheses briefed above.

In section A, Grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and text and discourse are considered. From the face of it, it may appear as if the author is going to move from the form of grammar to the meaning of that grammar. It is as if Harmer is about to tell the teachers about the form of, say, 'simple present', and then show them what this means. However, when you look closer at this section and its comprising units, it is a meaning-to-form-to-meaning cycle. In other words, the author, in the way he lays out this section, shows that meaning of grammar comes first, and then the form of grammar follows. Based on what Harmer is trying to do, a given teacher should first discuss the meaning of, say, 'simple past' with the students in the form of an example of things the teacher did yesterday. Then the teacher goes on to teach the learner how 'simple past' is constructed, its regular forms, and its irregular forms.

Each unit in section A starts with a short text, containing a target grammar, functioning as a context where form of the target grammar takes its meaning from. Use of context to clarify meaning is a recurrent theme throughout this section. As this is a pattern recurrently used at the beginning of all units throughout this section, the audience of the book will be influenced unconsciously and persuaded that acquisition begins with a clear context and clear meaning, but not the other way around. This is in line with the first component of the Input Hypothesis, which states that learners must be focused on comprehensible input (meaning) rather than on grammatical structures (form). This part of Krashen's theory is strongly reflected in almost all sections of the book.

To clarify the precedence of context and meaning over form and structure as shown by Krashen and reflected in this chapter, an example will be very helpful. In chapter 5 on page 21, titled, verb tenses (form and meaning) first, there is a text about a teacher who does not favor correcting homework. In the text, the reader can confront past and present tenses and the future form of some verbs. Below this section, the author discusses how verbs show time, using the sentences in the text. He did not start the unit by explaining how time in English is expressed and what forms are used to do so. This would not be focusing on comprehensible input, and this would be against Krashen's Input Hypothesis. After the easy to follow explanation preceded by a very clear context, the author shows how one form of grammar can have many meanings and how one meaning can be expressed via many grammatical forms.

The highlight of this section is chapter seven (p. 24), where the author demonstrates how to teach grammar, while concentrating on meaning and context, first. For example, he recommends that novice teachers play mime games to teach present continuous. Games have the potential to create context for grammatical points. When a teacher moves his/her hands in the gesture of driving a car, students recognize that the right sentence is, "The teacher is driving a car." This game can comprise the bigger portion of the class to the point that learners acquire 'present continuous'. The teacher can later

and briefly demonstrate the structure of the sentence, e.g. subject + to be verbs + present participle. The other way round cannot be as effective and it is against Krashen's Input hypothesis as it results in learning, not acquisition.

In section A, many things were said and conferred even topics such as 'teacher burnout' (p 23) or 'bullying' (p. 49), but nothing even remotely implicit about the other three components of Krashen's Input hypothesis or Long and Swain's hypotheses was conveyed. As this is a pivotal section, one that may be read many times or may be the only section read by readers as it is most directly related to the events of teaching, the author could shed light on these important matters in SLA field. The author could bring to the light the importance of negotiating the meaning of different grammatical points among learners.

In section B, Jeremy Harmer looks at the background issues which language teachers should be acquainted with as part of their essential knowledge so they can make better decisions when they are planning a lesson. In this section, he unambiguously sides with and quotes from Krashen's Input Hypothesis in full scale. He distinguishes learning from acquisition in exactly the same words as Krashen did, but he only marginally hints at the hypotheses following that of Krashen by writing, "Many people suggest that exposure to comprehensible input is not, in itself, enough for people to know and be able to speak a language. There has to be an element of conscious attention to the actual language that is being used in the input. This is especially important for learners who have reached (or gone through) puberty i.e. teenagers and adults" (p. 82). From this, one can infer that Krashen's Input theory is the foundation that the whole book is established upon. The other hypotheses play simply a peripheral role in the fabric of this manuscript. As a case in point, in chapter 37 on page 86, something similar to Long's idea of negative feedback is mentioned and discussed in only a few pages without citing any sources from which negative feedback gained importance in teaching adults or young learners.

In section C, the author looks at the ways of teaching the language system by which he means grammar and vocabulary and pronunciation and teaching the four main language skills. This chapter is the most important part of the book, which will be read by teachers frequently as it is about the actual teaching of language in the class. Precedence of meaning and context over the form and structure is the prominent underlying impression in this section. For instance, in chapter 45, Harmer advises that teachers "teach the WILL FUTURE with an imaginary visit to a fortune teller" (p. 104). This game creates a meaningful context from which students can acquire WILL FUTURE. Learners focus on the meaning of this structure before they learn its structure. This context also provides $i+1$ as students will have to acquire a structure, which they have not formally learnt yet.

In this section, there is also a brief and indirect note on $i+1$ from Krashen, as Harmer points out that "we should take care to match the speaking task with the level of the students" (page 116). The author could have made it clear what he meant by 'match' as it could confuse the readers. 'Match' implies either speaking at the same level as the students (i) or tuning to a level close to the language competency of students ($i+1$). This

matter remains vaguely stated and may have to be explained to beginner teachers by professional trainers.

Swain's Output Hypothesis is also secondarily declared as the author enumerates the reasons for speaking activities, stating that "Speaking activities give teacher and students a good idea of how well everyone is doing" (p.116). This is as close as possible Harmer gets to Output Hypothesis, and this may not be completely about the Output Hypothesis. The reason output is important to Swain is that it gives students a chance to self-analyze, a fact which can be minimally implied from Harmer's statement above. Finally, in this section, there is no visible trace of Long's Interaction Hypothesis.

In section D, classroom management is the focal point of the discussion. Harmer characterizes well-managed classes in contrast with badly-managed classes. In this section, he discusses teacher language and comprehensible input by pointing out that "teachers are the source of comprehensive input" (p.152). He also paraphrases i+1, "If we want to be comprehensible, we need to 'rough-tune' the language we use. In other words, we will simplify what we say, use repetition, say the same thing in different ways, and (sometimes) use exaggerated intonation" (p. 152). Harmer also discusses negative feedback (Interaction Hypothesis) in his own words but not to the effect that it was originally deliberated by Long. In this section, there is no visible trace of Swain's Output Hypothesis.

In the remaining sections (E-G), the traces of all theories become cold as Harmer's scope goes beyond the framework of the hypotheses against which we are evaluating the book. These sections generally deal with issues related to planning, resources, assessment, young learners, and content and language integrated learning.

In conclusion, from the perspective of the writer of this paper, the book, *Essential Teacher Knowledge* authored by Jeremy Harmer reflects to a great extent Krashen's model of second language acquisition and echoes to a little extent (and only parenthetically) the Interaction Hypothesis by Long and Output Hypothesis by Swain. Therefore, it can be characterized as a text that is only partly inclusive of the mainstream discussions of the SLA field. The reason for this can probably be found in what Saville-Troike (2006) states about the Krashen, "In spite of being severely criticized by researchers, Krashen's model had a major influence on language teaching in USA in the 1980s and 1990s, including avoidance of the explicit teaching of grammar in many hundreds of classrooms." The author of this book is from this period of a paradigm shift. From the analysis of his ideas in the book and his fascination with acquisition rather than learning, one can observe how influenced he is by Krashen mostly, but not as much by others.

From this critical examination, it can also be deduced that practitioners, in this case, teachers, commonly remain uninformed of the contemporary theories of their field because the handbooks that are supposed to convert theory to practice are not satisfactorily comprehensive, wide-ranging and up to the speed of the findings of researchers in the field. For instance, in the recent history of SLA research, considerable

emphasis has been placed on the notion of attention and noticing. Long discussed this in his Interaction Hypothesis, which was subsequently subjected to a large number of research studies. Based on the claims made by Long, it is through the negotiation of meaning that learners happen to notice a gap between what they already know about the language and what is new and unfamiliar. "It is through interaction (e.g., negotiation or recasts) that a learner's attention is focused on a specific part of the language, particularly on mismatches between TL forms and learner-language forms. There is both anecdotal and empirical evidence that learners are capable of noticing mismatches" (Gass & Selinker, 2008). A chapter on this very important matter is missing from this great guidebook. Teachers would benefit from having their students negotiate the meaning of certain new structures, e.g. third conditional.

Finally, there lies within this paper the potential to fashion a new structure to assess guidebooks to language teacher training. Employing this innovative instrument, stakeholders and educators can evaluate the depth and breadth of a course book and make adjustments where needed so they can train teachers who are able to demonstrate the most up-to-date teaching techniques in the classrooms. In this manner, the breach between theory and practice might finally close.

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