Principles of Language Learning and Teaching, Fourth Edition

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PREFACE TO THE FOURTH EDITION

WHEN THE first edition of *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* appeared in 1980, the field of second language acquisition (SLA) was relatively manageable. We had a handful of professional journals devoted to SLA, a good collection of anthologies and conference proceedings, and a small but respectable number of books on SLA and teaching. Today the field of SLA has so many branches and subfields and specializations that it is virtually impossible to "manage"!

In the December 1997 issue of the semi-annually published *Second Language Instruction/Acquisition Abstracts*, 180 periodicals were surveyed and 240 book reviews cited. Some thirty major subject matter areas included child language acquisition, non-native language pedagogy, testing, literacy studies, reading processes and instruction, writing, bilingualism, bilingual education, translation, pragmatics, discourse analysis, specific languages, lexicology, interpersonal behavior and communication, sociolinguistics, language planning, nonverbal language, and more. And several major fields were subsumed into other topics: psycholinguistics, intercultural communication, world Englishes, curriculum design, and critical pedagogy, among others. Incidentally, the December 1997 issue of the above mentioned abstracting journal was the last issue that was printed in hard copy; now, the material has to be electronically downloaded because there is more information than print media can handle!

Today we can see that the manageable stockpile of research of just a few decades ago has been replaced by a coordinated, systematic storehouse of information. Subfields have been defined and explored. Researchers around the world are meeting, talking, exchanging findings, comparing data, and arriving at some mutually acceptable explanations. A remarkable number of respectable, refereed journals are printing the best and most interesting of this research. Our research miscarriages are fewer as we have collectively learned how to conceive the right questions.

At the same time, we should not be too smug. The wonderful intricacy of complex facets of human behavior will be very much with us for some time. Roger Brown's (1966: 326) wry remark of a number of decades ago still applies:

> Psychologists find it exciting when a complex mental phenomenon—something intelligent and slippery—seems about to be captured by a mechanical model. We yearn to see the model succeed. But when, at the last minute, the phenomenon proves too much for the model and darts off on some uncapturable tangent, there is something in us that rejoices at the defeat.

We can rejoice in our defeats because we know that it is the very elusiveness of this phenomenon of SLA that makes the quest for answers so exciting. Our field of inquiry is no simple, unidimensional reality. It is "slippery" in every way.

PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE

Principles of Language Learning and Teaching is designed to give you a picture of both the slipperiness of SLA and the systematic storehouse of reliable knowledge that is now available to us. As you consider the issues, chapter by chapter, you are led on a quest for your own personal, integrated understanding of how people learn—and sometimes fail to learn—a second language. That quest is eclectic: no single theory or hypothesis will provide a magic formula for all learners in all contexts. And the quest is cautious: you will be urged to be as critical as you can in considering the merit of various models and theories and research findings. By the end of the final chapter, you will no doubt surprise yourself on how many pieces of this giant puzzle you can actually put together!

In its first three editions, this book has served a number of purposes for many audiences around the world. For graduates or advanced undergraduates in language-teacher education programs, it is a textbook on the theoretical foundations of language teaching. For a surprising number of people it has become a book that Master's degree candidates pore over in preparation for comprehensive examinations! For experienced teachers, it has become a handbook that provides an overview of current issues in the field.

For the most part, you do not need to have prior technical knowledge of linguistics or psychology in order to comprehend this book. An attempt has been made to build, from the beginning, on what an educated person knows about the world, life, people, and communication. And the book can be used in programs for educating teachers of any foreign language, even