The tapestry of language learning: The individual in the communicative classroom.

Robin C. Scarcella and Rebecca L. Oxford (1992)
Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle Publishers
Pp. 228. ISBN 0-8384-2359-0 (paper)
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The Tapestry of Language Learning is the cornerstone of a new series from Heinle and Heinle that ‘combine[s] communicative, thematic, task-based learning with a concern for students’ individual differences’ (p. v). The text sets out the authors’ philosophy about language teaching and language learning in a classroom setting. Although the tapestry metaphor is sometimes strained, the text provides a solid overview of the communicative approach to ESL instruction as it is often practiced in the United States and Canada.

The text is divided into three parts. Part I provides an overview of the Tapestry approach. Part II summarizes the authors’ positions on second language acquisition theories and learner characteristics. Part III deals with language skills, including grammar and culture.

The Tapestry of Language Learning does not focus on language acquisition theory or research, particularly in the adult academic or pre-academic ESL classroom. As an overview, it succeeds admirably, touching on most of the issues.
that concern active ESL teachers. The authors present a consistent viewpoint throughout, drawing heavily on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) and Canale and Swain's (1980) discussion of communicative language teaching. While they advocate integrative skills classes and content-based instruction (although the last half of the book treats the traditional skills separately).

Each chapter contains pre-reading questions and post-reading activities that provide useful triggers for discussion or learning log entries. My teacher trainees responded especially well to the section on teacher roles.

The text, however, has more breadth than depth. Chapters and sections alike are short, giving the reader a rushed, breathless feeling. In spite of the authors’ impressive research records, they provide few details on the research results that led them to develop this approach. The skills chapters are particularly thin, with learning styles and strategies, which were covered so admirably in Oxford (1990), only brushed the surface. Development particularly frustrating. The descriptions of competing theories are not thorough understanding of the concepts involved.

I used the text last year for an undergraduate teacher training class. Most of the students were trainees; most had not done a practicum. While the pre-reading questions stimulated many thoughtful journal entries, the post-reading activities were often too general or seemed to assume a basis of teaching experience that my students lacked. I also felt the students were frustrated by the lack of concrete detail in some chapters. Most of my students were planning to work with children in bilingual situations, and the text dealt very little with their concerns. The book also shows a strong US-Canada bias; teachers who must deal with the more structural methods often prevalent in other countries will find little help in adapting the Tapestry approach to their situations.

While I admit to having a bias against ‘name brand methods,’ the Tapestry Approach is sound overall. Interaction can never be strong enough when it is so easy for teachers to fall back on more structural approaches. Scarcella and Oxford also stress that communicative competence includes grammatical competence, to the extent of including a chapter on teaching grammar (but not other linguistic sub-skills). The textbooks that Heinle & Heinle has published under the Tapestry imprint are interesting, attractive books that won universally positive reviews from my teacher trainees. If this is any indication, the approach will acquire followers easily.

However, as a teacher trainer, I wished for more heft in the weave. I would like to see more depth in research support and classroom application. A text that advocates a comprehensive approach to language teaching should give more help to teachers who are just starting out. New teachers are the most open to new ideas, but the least able to put them into practice when they were language students themselves. They can’t always imagine innovative ways to ‘make writing fun’ (p. 134) and they often don’t understand the political or administrative reasons for segregated skills courses (p. 92). I would like to see more depth in research support and classroom application. A text that advocates a comprehensive approach to language teaching should give more help to teachers who are just starting out. New teachers are the most open to new ideas, but the least able to put them into practice when they were language students themselves. They can’t always imagine innovative ways to ‘make writing fun’ (p. 134) and they often don’t understand the political or administrative reasons for segregated skills courses (p. 92).

I welcome the Tapestry series to the arsenal of ESL teaching materials, and The Tapestry of Language Learning to ESL teacher training. No text can be all things to every audience, and Scarcella and Oxford have drawn together many threads to create a picture of a language classroom that is communicative, productive, and caring.
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