And What Do the Learners Think?

Introduction

The focus of research in the area of classroom language learning has shifted from an almost exclusive concern with the teacher and teaching procedures to issues related to the learner and learning processes. While a teacher-oriented view of learning characterises the students as passive recipients of whatever the teacher has to offer, a more learner-centred approach regards learners as actively involved in the learning process: ultimately, it is the learner who decides *how* and *what* to learn. One important factor that seems to guide learners in their individually different approaches is their understanding of the learning process, their conceptualisation of what is involved in learning a foreign language.

In this paper I would like to concentrate on the rationale for exploring learners' views.[1] Ideas from a number of studies will be brought together which point towards the importance of investigating learner thinking. After a brief discussion of some methodological issues, a current research project will be outlined and some preliminary results sketched out.

Input – Intake

Classroom observation and descriptions of classroom discourse, which initially concentrated mainly on the teacher and teacher talk, reveal that the teacher is not the sole contributor to what happens in the classroom. Learners are not simply exposed to input provided by the course-book or the teacher, but they contribute actively to what is available to be learnt.

Firstly, learners produce language themselves, which constitutes part of the *input*. Secondly, they are not simply passive participants in classroom interaction, reduced to the role of reacting, but they can take initiatives, they get involved in *negotiating input* by interfering in various ways (ALLWRIGHT, 1984). A lesson can therefore be seen as a jointly constructed event, a series of learning opportunities created by the learners and the teacher interacting with each other in the classroom context.

---

1 The terminology used by researchers from different fields to refer to what I loosely call «learners' views» here is extremely varied. It is not possible to discuss the different approaches in the context of this paper.

Thirdly, what learners learn from a lesson, what they «take in», is not simply what they have been taught. CORDER (1974) suggested the terms *input* and *intake* to differentiate between what is available to be learnt and what actually «goes in». More recently, ALLWRIGHT (1984) proposed the term *uptake* to refer to what learners have learnt from a lesson. He reports a study where some learners were asked at the end of a lesson what they thought they had learnt. About half the students came up with items that differed from what the teacher had intended to be the main teaching point. This seems to indicate that learners perceive one and the same lesson in different ways. ALLWRIGHT concludes:

> ...in some important sense, the lesson had in fact been about different things to different learners. (ALLWRIGHT, 1984, 3)

We could hypothesise that such «personally constructed lessons» constitute individually different learning experiences, leading to different kinds of intake, and presumably to different kinds of learning outcomes. This also means that even in the most traditional classrooms, learners take control, to a certain degree at least, over *what* and *how* they want to learn. In an extreme formulation we might even claim that, ultimately, each learner creates his or her own lesson.

GASS (1988) proposes a framework which allows the integration of such observations within a global view of second language acquisition. She suggests a model which distinguishes five levels, or stages, in a learner's conversion of input to output. The model is represented in the following diagram:
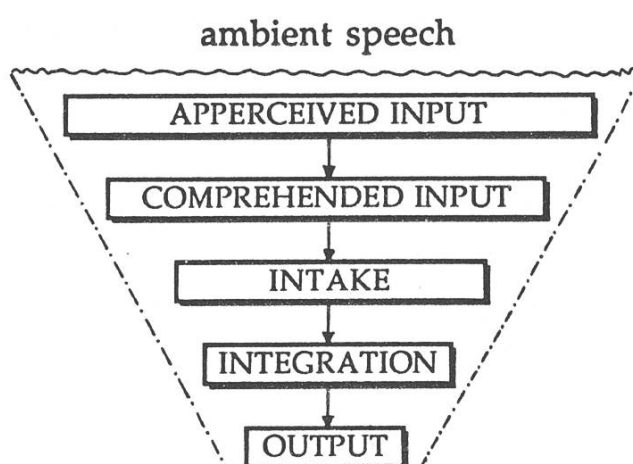

Figure 1: (GASS, 1988, 200)

30

Ambient speech refers to the language that the learners are exposed to, that surrounds them. Only some of this material is «apperceived», ie noticed and selected as meaningful or relevant by each learner. GASS characterises *apperception* as a priming device, which guides learners' attention to certain aspects of the target language. To apperceive is to «perceive in terms of past perceptions» (GASS, 1988, 201). Apperception is «the process of understanding by which newly observed qualities of an object are related to past experiences» (GASS, 1988, 201). She lists a number of factors which serve as «ambient speech filters», among them *prior knowledge,* by which she means existing knowledge of L1, L2 and any other language, language universals and world knowledge. GASS argues:

> Prior knowledge is one of the factors which determines whether or not the ambient speech becomes meaningful. (GASS, 1988, 202)

This means that prior knowledge and experience play an important role in determining what language elements can be further processed and eventually integrated into the learner's L2 system. The learners' understanding of what is involved in language learning activates, in part at least, their selective attention and functions as a trigger for the recognition of an event as a learning opportunity.

Learner Thinking

These ideas tie in with assumptions held in cognitive psychology about the role of concepts and schemata in people's understanding of the world and their influence on human behaviour. In his book *Concepts and Schemata* HOWARD (1987) states:

> How we look at the world depends on the concepts we know and use in order to understand it. Different people hold quite different concepts and thus look at aspects of the world in different ways [...] Concepts enable us to make enough sense of the world to behave adaptively. (HOWARD, 1987, 7)

For the specific case of foreign language learning we could postulate that the concepts that people hold of aspects of language and learning may guide the way they approach their learning tasks. The importance of learners' conceptualisations of language and learning, or their «subjective theories», is pointed out by GROTJAHN in his contribution to the *Handbuch Fremdsprachenunterricht* (BAUSCH et al., 1989):

Fremdsprachenunterricht ist ein soziales, an bestimmte Institutionen (z.B. Schule) und politische Systeme gebundenes Phänomen, das durch explizite und implizite (gesellschaftlich-politische) Normen, wie z.B. Lehrziele oder allgemeine Wertvorstellungen, bedingt ist. Dieser Sachverhalt äussert sich u.a. in den subjektiven und impliziten «Theorien» von Lehrern und Schülern. Diese «Theorien» sind aufgrund ihrer potentiell handlungsregulativen Funktion von zentraler Bedeutung für die Erklärung von Unterricht. (GROTJAHN, 1989, 383)

Foreign language learners' conceptions of the learning process have been investigated in connection with learner strategies. Studies in the area of learner strategies (cf. NAIMAN et al., 1978; WENDEN/RUBIN, 1987) has shown that learners approach learning in individually different ways. There does not seem to be a unique set of «good» learning strategies, but success or failure depends on the appropriacy of a strategy for a particular learner in a particular learning situation. WENDEN (1987) suggests that a learner's choice of his or her own set of learning strategies, a learner's characteristic approach to learning, is related to a preferred set of *beliefs* about language learning.

Similarly, ABRAHAM/VANN (1987) claim that there is a connection between learners' *philosophies,* their general *approach,* their choice of *strategies* and learning *outcome:*

We suggest that learners have, at some level of consciousness, a *philosophy* of how language is learned. This philosophy guides the *approach* they take in language learning situations, which in turn is manifested in observable (and unobservable) *strategies* used in learning and communication. These factors form a hierachy [...] and they directly influence the degree of success learners achieve.

(ABRAHAM/VANN, 1987, 96)
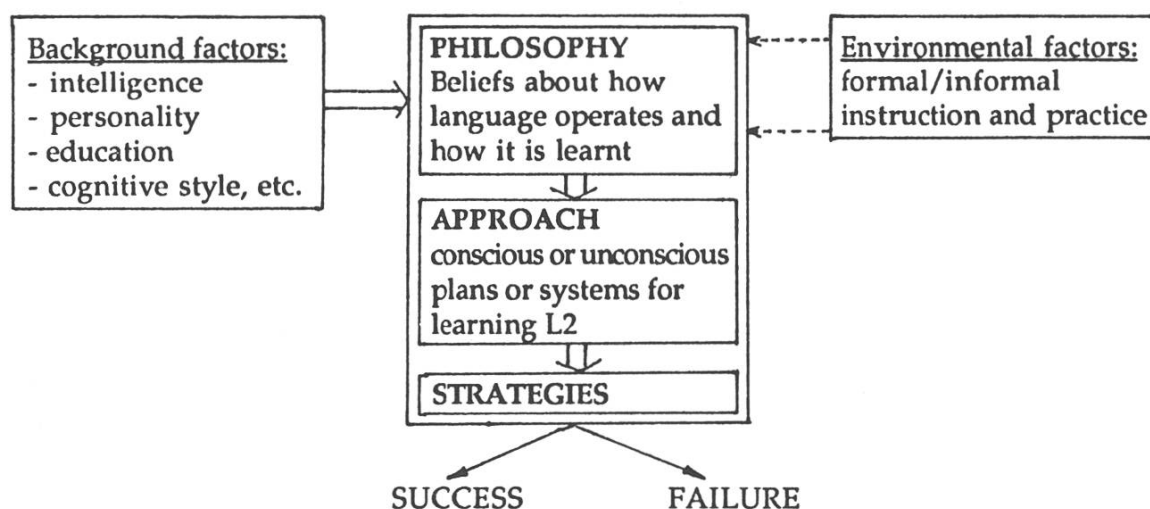
The following model for L2 learning is postulated:

Figure 2: (ABRAHAM/VANN, 1987, 97: Model of Second Language Learning)

32

A series of experimental studies of text comprehension conducted in the field of educational psychology (cf. MARTON et al., 1984) have shown that there is a qualitative difference in the ways in which individual students understand texts. These tend to be related to different approaches that students take in tackling the reading task. The approaches, in turn, seem to correlate with different conceptualisations of learning held by the individual students. This suggests that there is a functional relation between *learning outcome* (a qualitative assessment of what learners have learnt), *learning approach* (the way learners go about dealing with learning tasks), and *learners' conceptions of learning* (the mode in which people subjectively construe learning). This could be represented in the following diagram:
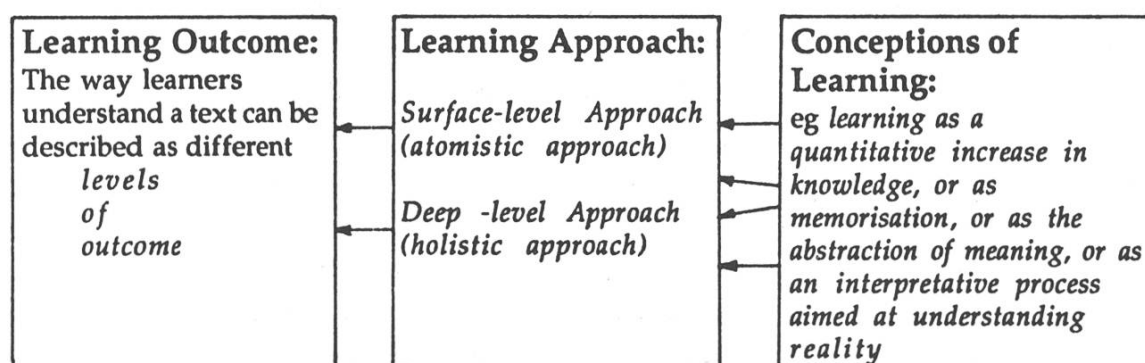
Learning Outcome:	**Learning Approach:**	**Conceptions of Learning:**
The way learners understand a text can be described as different *levels* *of* *outcome*	*Surface-level Approach (atomistic approach)* *Deep -level Approach (holistic approach)*	eg *learning as a quantitative increase in knowledge, or as memorisation, or as the abstraction of meaning, or as an interpretative process aimed at understanding reality*

Figure 3: (Relation between learning outcome – learning approach – conceptions of learning: cf. MARTON et al., 1984)

Research Methodology: Questionnaires and Interviews

The label «phenomenography» has been suggested by MARTON (1981, 1988) for the field of research which aims at finding and systematising forms of thought in terms of which people interpret significant aspects of reality. The aim of such research would be to detect and define categories of description for the various ways in which people conceptualise their world. In the specific case of EFL learning this would mean looking for categories that learners seem to rely on in order to make sense of their learning world.

A number of techniques have been developed which provide access to such mental data (cf. FAERCH/KASPER, 1987; HUBER/MANDL [eds] 1982). I would like to discuss *questionnaires* and *interviews,* since these have both been used in studies of EFL learner beliefs.

HORWITZ (1987) describes a 34-item questionnaire, developed to assess students' beliefs about language and learning: *the Belief About Language Learning Inventory* (BALLI). Five areas of beliefs are distinguished: foreign

language aptitude, the difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivations. The instrument is attractive as the data could be subjected to statistical analyses and beliefs could be correlated with other learner variables. However, the use of questionnaires at this stage of research development seems to me to be premature. Questionnaires do not leave room for unforeseen viewpoints; the data are pre-structured in terms of the categories established by the researcher. For an initial exploratory investigation, a more open approach is needed.

The data on which the BALLI questionnaire is based were elicited mainly from teachers. It seems vital, however, that such a list of beliefs or cognitions should be derived from a careful qualitative analysis of learner data.

Interviews offer a more open approach and yield data which are better suited to an exploratory approach. From the point of view of objective research, interview data are very problematic. In the study of language learning processes, for example, they provide very limited insights. Subjects can only talk about aspects of their conscious knowledge; they will not be able to report on mental processes and unconscious mechanisms. If learners talk about their learning experiences we may not even assume that this is what really goes on. Learners can only tell us what they think is going on. Thus if learners describe how they proceed when they are learning something, we have no way of knowing whether this is what they actually do, or what they think they do, or perhaps, what they think they ought to do. What we get, therefore, are reports of learning experiences, or crudely put, *stories* and *opinions*. Learners present us with their viewpoints, their interpretations of the learning process, their ways of trying to make sense of what is going on. And this is precisely what renders such data valuable for researchers interested in subjective theories and beliefs.

Investigating Learner Thinking: a Research Project

The research project outlined in this section has not been completed yet and it is therefore only possible to refer to some very preliminary results and indicate the general direction that the analysis is taking.

The aim of the study is to find categories that reflect EFL learners' conceptions of *language* and *learning*.

The study is based on a set of 22 semi-structured interviews with adult EFL learners in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. The learners were attending courses at different levels of proficiency and in different types of schools. Five groups of 3-6 subjects were interviewed. The inter-

viewer attended a lesson and subsequently conducted 60-minute interviews with individual learners, preferably on the same day. The questions ranged from very specific points referring to the actual lesson to more general issues about language and learning. The recorded interviews were transcribed.

The analysis is a reiterative procedure, starting out from very broad categories, which are successively narrowed down or changed as certain tendencies emerge. Turns are used as units of analysis. These are labelled systematically, so that extracts can be compared across interviews, which leads to the definition of different conceptualisations of particular aspects.

This categorisation process involves a relatively high degree of inference on the analyst's part. This is inevitable – and in fact a concomitant of this type of research – it reflects the very phenomenon which constitutes the subject of the investigation. That the emerging categories are a result of an interaction between the researcher's expectations and the data is reflected in the form in which the definitions are presented. Each category is first characterised in the researcher's words, which is followed by one or more extracts from the data.

As an illustration I would like to present some preliminary categories, which have emerged from the data. They refer to very broad conceptualisations of *language*. Three main views of language seem to emerge:

1. Functional

Language is used to communicate, to convey messages. The focus is on meaning, message, content; on understanding and making oneself understood.

> CT: [lacht] «Es Kommunikationsmittel, oder. Ja, oder (.) so das mer äifach sich cha verständige underenand. Soorge und Nööte und ales mögliche, und au Fröide, oder, as mer da cha aavertraue, und dänn (.) nootwändigi Sache em andere mittäile.»
> [72 CT 316–322]

2. Structural

Language is a «code», a «construction set» of words that can be combined in certain predetermined ways. The focus is on form *(words, grammar) and* correctness.

> MJ: «Andersiits häsch aber au en gwüsse Bouchaschte-n-im Chopf (.) vo Wörter und Regle.» [43 MJ 310]
> CS: «Das sind Wörter. Wörter, Sätz. E Sprach, des sind Wörter, äh in, in verschidene Sätz zämegsetzt.» [23 CS 573-9]

35

3. Rhetorical

Language offers a variety of words and structures for speakers to choose from. The focus is on style *and the* speaker.

> RG: «Ich, ich finde (.) wämmer s aafangt richtig überlege, isch das e fantastischi Fèhig-
> käit, wo de Mänsch hät. Das er sich spraachlich – Und dänn wird s ebe au öppis
> Schööns. Und dänn cha s letschtlich sogar e Kunscht wèèrde. Äh, öppis Kunschtvolls,
> sich chöne mitztäile.
>
> Ich finde s unwaarschiindlich, das si mit e paar Wort, wänn si die rächt wèèled,
> also, und zwar nöd emal (.) es isch jetzt nüd emal nur uf de müntlich Voorgang, sondern
> ä de schriftlich, das si i, i dem wo si aaspräched, vor alem en Mänsch wo si vilicht
> scho chli nööcher stönd, äigentlich e ganzi Wält chönd wa- wachwèèrde laa. Was si
> mit de Spraach, mit em spraachliche Uusdruck äigentlich chönd uuslööse.
>
> Mer sötti sich äigentlich so voll so voll wi möglich chöne mittäile (.) das me (.) das
> me wiitergaat. Das mer also d Fiinhäite [. . .] Das chunt äh (.) der äh Gebruuch, wi-n-en
> (.) der Ängländer, wüür ich jetzt emal säge, ebe i siiner Situation bruucht.»
>
> [33 RG 363-75]

The definitions of these broad areas represent a first step in the attempt to trace learners' differential understanding of language learning. These very general categories of different conceptualisations of *language* need to be complemented by other categories referring to other aspects of language and learning. The patterns of their interrelation should yield a description which will help us towards a better understanding of what language learning looks like from the learner's point of view.

University of Zurich   Silvia Kübler
English Seminar
CH-8047 Zurich

References

ABRAHAM, Roberta G.; VANN, Roberta J. (1987): «Strategies of two language learners: a case study.» In: WENDEN, A.; RUBIN, J., 85–102.

ALLWRIGHT, Dick (1984): «Why don't learners learn what teachers teach? – The Interaction Hypothesis.» In: SINGLETON, David M. and LITTLE, David G. (eds): *Language Learning in Formal and Informal Contexts.* Dublin, IRAAL, 3–18.

CORDER, S. Pit (1974): «The significance of learners' errors.» In: RICHARDS, Jack C. (ed.): *Error Analysis.* London, Longman, 19–27. ISBN 0-582-55044-0.

FAERCH, Claus; KASPER, Gabriele (eds) (1987): *Introspection in Second Language Research.* Clevedon, Multilingual Matters. ISBN 0-905028-72-4.

GASS, Susan M. (1988): «Integrating research areas: a framework for second language studies.» *Applied Linguistics 9/2,* 198–217.

GROTJAHN, Rüdiger (1989): «Empirische Forschungsmethoden: Überblick.» In: BAUSCH, Karl-Richard; CHRIST, Herbert; HÜLLEN, Werner; KRUMM, Hans-Jürgen: *Handbuch Fremdsprachenunterricht.* Tübingen, Francke, 383–387. ISBN 3-7720-1788-6.

HORWITZ, Elaine K. (1987): «Surveying students' beliefs about language learning.» In: WENDEN, A.; RUBIN, J., 119–129.

HOWARD, Robert W. (1987): *Concepts and Schemata.* London, Cassell. ISBN 0-304-31370-X.

HUBER, Günter L. and MANDL, Heinz (eds) (1982): *Verbale Daten.* Weinheim/Basel, Beltz. ISBN 3-407-54632-7.

MARTON, Ference (1981): «Phenomenography – describing conceptions of the world around us.» *Instructional Science 10,* 177–200.

MARTON, Ference (1988): «Phenomenography a research approach to investigating different understandings of reality». In: SHERMAN, Robert R. and WEBB, Rodman B. (eds): *Qualitative Research in Education: Focus and Methods.* London, The Falmer Press, 141–161. ISBN 1-85000-381-5.

MARTON, Ference et al. (eds) (1984): *The Experience of Learning.* Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press. ISBN 7073-0355-9.

NAIMAN, N. et al. (1978): *The Good Language Learner.* Toronto, Ontario, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

WENDEN, Anita L. (1987): «How to be a successful language learner: Insights and prescriptions from L2 learners.» In: WENDEN, A.; RUBIN, J., 103–117.

WENDEN, Anita; RUBIN, Joan (eds) (1987): *Learner Strategies in Language Learning.* Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall. ISBN 0-13-527110-X.