

**EXPLORING LEARNER LANGUAGE BY E. TARONE AND B. SWIERZBIN**

Tarone, E., & Swierzbin, B. (2009). *Exploring learner language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. List price: \$34.95.

**Reviewed by  
Peter I. De Costa**

Unlike most introductory Second Language Acquisition (SLA) books which generally cover core SLA theories and summarize research findings, this book by Elaine Tarone and Bonnie Swierzbin provides its readers with much hands-on practice in analyzing learner language. Guided by Dick Allwright's (2005) Exploratory Practice framework, the book adopts a case study approach to SLA by focusing on how six ESL adult learners from China, Mexico, and Central Africa use English as they engage in a range of elicitation tasks.

The book is organized into an introduction and eight chapters. While Chapters 1 and 2 examine individual differences in L2 learning and survey key SLA theories respectively, the next five chapters (Chapters 3-7) explore how learner language can be analyzed from five different theoretical perspectives: error and target-like use (TLU) analysis, developmental sequence, interactional analysis, referential effectiveness, and complexity of language needed for academic purposes. The last chapter (Chapter 8) provides teachers with advice on how to analyze the language of learners in their own classrooms.

Particularly striking is how the authors successfully manage to merge theory and practice throughout the book. Each chapter begins with the introduction of key SLA concepts which are subsequently applied to learner language data. For example, readers are introduced to the concepts of negotiation of meaning, interactional modification, and corrective feedback in Chapter 5, which focuses on learning in interaction. These concepts are then illustrated with sample data of actual language use by the six focal learners drawn from video samples. Following this, readers are then led to an exercise which requires them to put into application the newly introduced concepts. After this initial exercise, the notion of corrective feedback is further developed by the authors who go on to discuss and illustrate the different types of corrective feedback such as explicit correction, recasts, and prompts that are commonly used by teachers and learners. For concept reinforcement, readers are then led to another exercise which allows them to see how the different forms of corrective feedback emerge in the learner data. In short, the carefully engineered movement between theory and practice provides readers with the valuable hands-on and exploratory practice that frames the book.

In addition to the video samples of learner language in the DVD which accompanies the book, readers will appreciate the transcripts of the learner language located at the end of the book as well as the list of recommended further readings for each chapter. Also noteworthy are the possible responses to the chapter exercises found in the answer discussion section at the back of the book. This makes this book a valuable resource not only for teacher educators, but also teacher-learners who intend to engage in self-study. The book culminates in a useful guide (Chapter 8) on how to embark on an independent research project with one's own language learners. Especially helpful in this last chapter are pointers on how to protect learners' rights and salient advice on how to collect learner language data.

Another strength of this book is how the authors provide a critique of the different approaches to exploring learner language in each chapter. For example in Chapter 3, the authors identify some of the limitations of error analysis as a tool for looking at learner language, before

introducing the interlanguage (IL) analysis tool called target-like use (TLU). Such an evaluation, coupled with the probing questions that invite readers to reflect on the efficacy of each approach and the difficulties encountered by them, ensures a balanced treatment of the various language analysis approaches covered in the book.

However, as well-organized and coherent as the materials in this book are, I feel that readers would have further benefited if the authors had moved beyond mainstream SLA theories to engage in socially-oriented perspectives in SLA. Except for the notable discussion of scaffolding and the Vygotskian concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the social turn in SLA was not addressed in this book. In other words, it would have been helpful if the authors had considered other socially-oriented perspectives such as learning as changing participation in situated practices and critical approaches to language learning which takes into account issues of power (cf. Zuengler & Miller, 2006).

Overall, this book is a sterling addition to the pool of SLA textbooks currently available. I foresee that it will be an integral part of introductory classes on SLA, in particular one which seeks to provide with much needed practice in analyzing learner language. After all, it is vitally important that practitioners not only become familiar with core SLA theories, but also comfortable when applying these theories to actual language used in their classrooms.

## **REVIEWER**

Peter I. De Costa is a doctoral candidate in the Second Language Acquisition Program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He has been an English teacher in a Singapore high school and worked as a teacher educator at the National Institute of Education (Singapore). He has also taught academic writing to international students enrolled in the ESL program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In the fall of 2010, he will be a Visiting Professor (in TESOL) at the Monterey Institute of International Studies.

## **References**

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