

A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning by Peter Skehan.
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As various approaches to second language acquisition (SLA) pedagogy have developed over the course of the last fifty years, advocates of particular approaches have often attempted to justify their advocacy with appeals to theories current in the fields of linguistics, psychology, and sociology. Likewise, Peter Skehan, in his recently published *A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning*, argues for the efficacy of task-based instruction in second language learning by invoking recent research into the psycholinguistic and cognitive aspects of language learning, giving particular attention to the recent research into the mechanics of language “processing.” What is unique in Skehan’s approach is its emphasis on the importance of individuals’ cognitive *differences*—a topic which has been generally neglected by advocates of most other SLA methodologies and “normative” approaches.

In the first part of this book, Skehan describes what he considers to be the cognitive bases for second language learning. Here, he addresses two of the central concerns in second language development theory: First, how interlanguage development occurs through comprehension and production, and second, at what point in the second language acquisition process language learners begin to productively *notice* target form. Skehan’s review of the existing literature on these topics is instructive in its own right: Krashen (1985), for example, argues that if a student is exposed to a sufficient amount of comprehensible *input*, then naturally second language learning takes place. Conversely, Swain’s (1985) “output” hypothesis argues that in the attempt to *compose* new utterances, acquisition of new syntactic structures will most likely naturally occur. Additionally, proponents of “negotiation of meaning” approaches to language learning (e.g., Long, 1985; Pica, 1994) suggest that engagement with conversational “moves” (such as collaborative completions, clarification requests, and comprehension checks) makes target language input more comprehensible and thus increases its potential usefulness as output in interlanguage development.

In *A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning*, Skehan critically investigates all of the above approaches and, finding them explanatorily inadequate, provides a totally different picture of the methods and the mechanisms of second language acquisition and processing by arguing that in real-time communication, *meaning* becomes the central focus and that learners rely heavily on memorized language (bypassing rule-based analytical systems) in order to reduce their cognitive processing costs.

Skehan suggests that theorists need to consider more than just the roles that lexical and memory-based language systems play in second language acquisition and processing. Toward this end, he proposes a “dual mode” of language learning and processing—one that is both “rule-based” and “exemplar-based” and which is critical for *all* aspects of second language processing. This dual-mode learning system assumes that both input and output processing must have access to both rules and exemplars.

The rule-based system is generative and restructurable. Access to this system leads to the development of a form-oriented system but incurs the costs of heavy processing burdens during ongoing language use. Conversely, the exemplar-based system is heavily based on redundant memory systems. Since this system does not require internal computation, its advantage is a marked increase in processing speed; for the same reason, however, it is less efficient in incorporating changes to the underlying system.

Using the dual mode hypothesis, Skehan posits three stages of information processing—input, central processing, and output—and argues that the finite limitation of attentional resources forces second language learners to select compensatory strategies peculiar to each stage. For example, a learner may tend to give priority to the extraction of “meaning” during the processing of input, and access the exemplar-based system to find semantic correspondences. During output processing, on the other hand, learners must negotiate a “trade-off” as they allocate their attentional resources between the three competing requirements of accuracy, complexity, and fluency. Here, for example, a learner may pay less attention to fluency and complexity when under communicational pressure and allocate the majority of attentional resources to the rule-based system in order to gain accuracy. The problem with such “trade-off” tendencies is obvious: what the second language learner really wants is what the native speaker possesses naturally—that is, a seamless balance between accuracy, fluency and complexity.

In the second part of *A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning*, Skehan suggests task-based instruction as a solution to this problem. Citing results of his experiments and those done by his colleagues, Skehan argues that both task and instruction influence and provoke different cognitive strategies. He argues that tasks should be designed in such a way that the learners are forced to variously employ *all* their processing strategies—accuracy, fluency, and complexity—which are competing with each other due to limited attentional resources during language production and which should each be exploited in the effort toward a balance of production. The five principles for task-based instruction that Skehan proposes are the following:

1. Choose a range of target structures.
2. Choose tasks that meet the utility criterion.
3. Select and sequence tasks to achieve balanced goal development.
4. Maximize the chances of focus on form through attentional manipulation.
5. Use cycles of accountability. (p. 129)

Skehan argues that by carefully controlling the different facets of the task (such as number of interacting participants or the nature of the information that the learner must deal with), it is possible to manipulate the strategies that learners will need to employ in order to complete the task. Thus, by setting task goals and implementing task sequences in recognition of the competing requirements of accuracy, complexity, and fluency, a balanced development between these three requirements can take place.

Principal to Skehan's discussion on the cognitive bases of second language acquisition is the assumption that after the so-called "critical period," second language learners no longer have access to the Language Acquisition Device with which they learned their first language; hence, second language learning is general cognitive learning. "Modularity" exists only in terms of the information-processing *stages* in post-critical period second language learning, which is fundamentally different from the modularity between syntax and semantics in first language learning. In second language learning, as general cognitive learning, claims Skehan, individual differences in terms of aptitude, learning style, and learning strategies play significant roles that find no counterpart in first language acquisition and processing.

Based on the proposed three processing stages of input, central processing, and output, Skehan suggests three corresponding aptitude factors: *phonemic coding ability*, *language analytic ability*, and *memory*. "Phonemic coding ability" deals with the segmentation of sounds and the conversion of auditory material into *processable input* for later analysis. This ability is particularly important at the beginning stage of language learning. "Language analytic ability" concerns patterning and rule formation. This ability is important at all stages. "Memory," in Skehan's system, refers primarily to the above-mentioned "exemplar-based" component of the dual-mode processing system. This is the ability that enables "exceptional language learners" to attain native-like selection and native-like fluency, and plays its most important role primarily at the advanced level.

Finally, Skehan clarifies the diffused research area of "learning styles" by distinguishing *process* and *representation* and relating them to information processing stages. While the "aptitudinal" aspect of individuals' differences is hard to change, claims Skehan, individual differences in language learning *style* and *strategy* can be modified relatively easily. The remedy he offers to incorporate these individual differences in terms of aptitude and learning strategies is "project work." According to Skehan, by designing project work properly, accuracy, fluency, and complexity can all be maximized. For instance, during the execution of "appropriate pre-task activities, and careful task implementation, followed by high priority being attached to post-task reflection activities, a great deal of variation in the focus of attention is possible" (p. 271). Skehan argues that curriculum and syllabus design should orient the learners toward creativity and openness to change in this respect so that individual students become autonomous, responsible learners while developing effective strategy use.

Skehan's language learning model is clearly the most cognitive one in the current field of second language acquisition research; however, reading *A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning* makes me wonder how big the gap is between such psycholinguistic/cognitive research and the reality of teaching and learning in a foreign language classroom. In order to operationalize such thoughtful, clearly argued scholarship, and in order to endeavor to implement its pedagogical application, fairly ideal conditions have to be assumed. For example, a course based on Skehan's model must have a clearly determined and agreed-upon goal, the learners must be active, and the teacher must be willing to negotiate the structure of the course to match the students' often conflicting educational needs and desires. In addition, the course must have access to an appropriate assessment system that can effectively reflect the learners' progress rather than what the teacher believes students should know.

One of the problems with implementing such a program is that the majority of Skehan's justifications for task-based instruction are theoretical: the author does not provide concrete case studies of how actual learning takes place, or how second language learners' interlanguage systems are changed or restructured through the activities he suggests. Most importantly, we do not yet know how effective Skehan's "processing" approach may turn out to be—a caveat which Skehan himself refers to in acknowledging the need for further research.

Nonetheless, Skehan's book suggests an innovative and potentially important framework for pedagogical application in second language learning, second language teaching, and second language assessment. It remains to be seen how future research into cognitive processing and proficiency development may validate or repudiate its novel claims.

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