Introspection Into What?

Claus Faerch and
Gabriele Kasper (Eds.)
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Review by
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T he acquisition of a second language (SLA), be it in the classroom or by everyday interaction, has never been a focal area of psychological research. This is surprising, not only because of the interest that any activity of the human mind as common and as important as SLA should naturally excite. SLA also comprises, in a nutshell, virtually all areas of psychological research—from acoustical perception to the motivational impact of emotions and attitudes, from semantic memory to articulatory control, from analogical reasoning to problems of lateralization. This relative neglect is probably due to the fact that second language learning has been seen much more from the teacher's than from the learner's point of view; it has been perceived as an educational problem rather than as a complex activity of the learner's cogni-

tive system. Over the past 10 years, there has been a slow but distinct change in perspective, and the present book is another step in this direction.

The common idea of the book's 14 papers is to test and to evaluate methods that would give insight into what is going on in the learner when he or she tries to make use of a (limited) knowledge of the language to be learned. The best known of these methods, in the foreground of this book, is "thinking aloud," as first systematically applied by Selz (1913) and recently rekindled by several researchers, notably Ericcson and Simon (1984). In addition, some "off-line" methods are used, such as "self-revelation" or "retrospective interview."

The first four chapters are methodological. In their own contribution ("From Product to Process—Introspec-

tive Methods in Second Language Research"), Faerch and Kasper suggest a classification of all introspective methods. Chapter 2 ("Verbal Reports on Thinking"), by Ericcson and Simon, sums up their 1984 book. It is by far the most interesting paper of the whole volume, but there is nothing new in it. In Chapter 3 ("On the Methodological Basis of Introspective Methods"), by Grotjahn, and in Chapter 4 ("Using Verbal Reports in Research on Language Learning"), by Cohen, the relative merits and shortcomings of introspective methods are discussed. Grotjahn's contribution is a very comprehensive, but also very abstract, comparison of introspective with other, more objective techniques familiar from linguistics and experimental psychology. Cohen reports and evaluates some of his own attempts to use introspective methods in SLA.

The remaining 10 papers report on various empirical studies, most of them in their beginning stages, and most of the authors stress the pilot nature of their work. Therefore, the reader is confronted more with practical experiences in applying a new method (new in this field) than with conclusive results. This makes the papers interesting to read but difficult to comment on. Rather than dealing with them individually, my discussion is confined to two more general observations that, I think, hold true for most of the work reported here. First, all studies deal with second language learning in the classroom (in contrast to SLA by everyday communication), hence with a setting in which the language to be learned is made accessible to the learner's cognitive system in the course of an explicitly set syllabus, and more in the form of metalinguistic descriptions than in the form of actual communication (for which the human language processor was actually designed). This strongly influences the learner's "thinking" and his "thinking aloud" about what he is doing when applying his knowledge. Thinking aloud may tell us more about how someone deals with explicitly taught rules than about how his or her natural capacity to learn and to process languages functions.

Second, almost all of the work reported here deals with the way in which the learner attempts to solve "little tasks" of second language use, in particular, translation problems in written texts. This is sometimes fascinating, and every reader will recognize his or her own efforts to find the appropriate word or construction in a foreign idiom. There are also some first hints on how these at-

tempts could be guided by more general strategies of problem solving. If properly continued, this line of investigation may indeed tell us a lot about a speaker's strategies in making optimal use of his limited knowledge in a setting where the usual time constraints on speaking and understanding do not obtain. At this point, however, it is hard to see how it could tell us something about the functioning of that part of the human cognitive system that enables us to speak, to understand, and to extend this capacity to a second language.

References

Ericcson, K. A., & Simon, H. A. (1984). *Protocol analysis.* Cambridge, MA: MIT

Selz, O. *(1913). Über die Gesetze des geordneten Denkverlaufs.* Stuttgart, Federal Republic of Germany: Spemann.