

Review of “Exploring Learner Language”

Title	Exploring Learner Language
Authors	Elaine Tarone and Bonnie Swierzbina
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Learning about and teaching a course on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has never been more accessible with a practical and hands-on resource like *Exploring Learner Language* by Elaine Tarone and Bonnie Swierzbina, which is also part of the Oxford Handbooks for Language Teachers series that is recommended for use in training courses and seminars, and as reference texts. Tarone, the first author who is also the Director of the Center of Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA), was stirred to write this book while teaching a course titled ‘Basics of SLA for Teachers’ at CARLA Summer Institute, and after advocating a more hands-on approach for teaching SLA in language teaching courses at the CARLA’s Language Teacher Education Conference in 2007. *Exploring Learner Language* is a direct response to what the authors see as gaps or missing links in the instruction of SLA in teacher preparatory courses. They posit that theory based teaching of SLA is no longer sufficient for language teachers and that they should also be equipped with basic skills and tools for analyzing and understanding learner language in their classrooms. In the Introduction, the authors state:

The introductory SLA course designed both for researchers and teachers should contain both a Lecture component and a Laboratory component. In the Laboratory component, beginning researchers, prospective, and in service teachers can learn to do their own descriptions of learner language, and interpret those descriptions in light of the more general knowledge gained in lecture. (p. xvi)

This book is the product of this attempt to reconcile the lecture and laboratory components.

The 185-page book and DVD which was first published in 2009, is organised into eight chapters, starting with an introduction that explains the purpose of the book and the principles guiding the authors’ treatment of the subject matter that is based on Exploratory Practice (Allwright, 2001, 2005; Allwright & Hanks, 2009, as cited in Introduction). Chapter One focuses on the subject of study in SLA – second language learners, and invites the reader to consider the different variables at play that may have an impact on learners’ patterns of language acquisition. In the second chapter of the book, the authors give an overview of second language acquisition research, discuss interlanguage and present a brief description and discussion of the central theoretical approaches that have informed SLA research and their pedagogical implications.

Chapters Three to Seven in the book guide the reader through different approaches and techniques in exploring learner language. Chapter Three helps the reader explore learners’ interlan-

guage forms with error and contrastive analysis, while Chapter Four focuses on studying the developmental sequences in learner language. The authors then make a shift from 'focus on form' in the study of isolated linguistic features to 'focus on meaning' by exploring the features of learner language used in interaction in Chapter Five. Chapter Six further develops this theme by examining another aspect of learner language in interaction: the way it is used in referential communication. In Chapter Seven, the authors guide the reader in exploring complex syntax and vocabulary development in learner language in relation to the requirements of academic and professional discourse.

The final chapter of the book is a wrap-up to the previous five chapters of exposure to different techniques and approaches in exploring learner language. Apart from being a helpful and an excellent guide to starting a project in the exploration of learner language, it provides the reader with a framework for understanding their own learning and teaching practices. The chapter starts with a description of Exploratory Practice framework, using a flowchart that guides the reader through different stages in decision making, beginning with Contemplation (as in Reflective Practice), moving on to Action for Understanding (as in Exploratory Practice) and finally culminating with Action for Change (as in Action Research) to help the reader set up a project independently. The chapter also supplies useful and insightful information on the collection of data along with principles guiding the design and administration of tasks to elicit the data for study. Chapter Eight could well stand on its own as material for a seminar or workshop on Action Research.

Exploring Learner Language is highly recommended as a resource or textbook for an SLA module in TESOL and Applied Linguistics courses simply because it is written with practical information and help for the student in understanding and exploring SLA. Each chapter is well-organized and follows a textbook template, progressing from a brief general context-setting preview to a more focused discussion in its exploration of learner language, and concludes with a summary and a list of related readings as reference on the topic. To give the reader the hands-on practice advocated by the authors, each chapter also provides various exercises accompanied by video segments on the DVD, serving as tools to practice describing and analyzing the language produced by ESL learners. It would seem that the authors had thought of everything that the reader needs for SLA research. In addition to the transcripts and written narratives for the videos, the book also provides photocopyable resources and a sample consent form for ethics clearance to help the reader embark on his own independent study. Other helpful features in the book include the Answer Discussion Section and the Glossary for the terminology used in the field of linguistics.

To sum up, *Exploring Learner Language* has certainly lived up to its authors' objective of reconciling theory with practice in the instruction of SLA. The book does not shortchange the reader in its coverage of SLA or the preparation needed for his own exploration of learner language. What sets the book apart from other resources on SLA is that it takes an integrated approach in its presentation of information; the authors do not only preach but involve the reader as an active participant in their work of exploring learner language. It is undoubtedly the much needed resource in the field of teacher education and SLA.

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