

Book Review

Williams, Thomas A.: English Language Learners' Socially Constructed Motives and Interactional Moves. (2018). Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

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In this volume Thomas A. Williams investigates the language learning experience of Hungarian university students (from the University of Szeged), particularly with regard to task-based language learning and teaching (TBLT). The author starts out (in Chapter Two, after a brief introduction in Chapter One) with an extremely thorough, yet very logically constructed, thus easy-to-follow review of the groundbreaking literature on TBLT and related paradigms on language learning, such as the notions of focus on form (FonF) and a sociocultural theory of mind. By conjoining these – at times seemingly rather distinct – areas into a coherent system, he manages to present the reader with an exhaustive description of the theoretical background of his research, which also includes a contrastive segment that compares TBLT to more traditional, less meaning-focused approaches as well as some critical observations that shed light on the possible weaknesses of this paradigm.

As regards the actual findings presented in this book, they come from a study that the author carried out within a socially constructed framework, seeking answers to six research questions, their topics ranging from the learners' view and experience regarding (English) language learning in general, through their attitude to TBLT in particular, all the way to their contribution to the implementation of speaking tasks involving collaboration and meaning negotiation in the classroom, etc. What is also important to mention is that the author expresses some very clear preliminary expectations based on the work of earlier investigators of this area, namely that learner interaction breaks down for meaning negotiation, and also that negotiation for meaning is uncommon in this context.

The study was carried out in a university setting, with university students majoring (or taking a minor) in English or American Studies, their proficiency level ranging from upper-intermediate to advanced, which shows that they have had considerable experience in learning English as a foreign language. The research itself can be broken down into a questionnaire/interview and a task performance phase. While

the questionnaire and the interview focus on learners' experience and beliefs about different types of language learning and teaching, the task performance phase involves the same students engaging in interactional learning in a task-based classroom.

At the beginning of each section on the findings, the author presents some more theoretical foundation as well as the results of previous studies that are thematically linked to the present research, but were carried out with a slightly different focus, methodology, respondents, etc., serving to contextualize the present study to an even greater extent. This adds to the instructive nature of this volume, making it exceedingly useful for (would-be) scholars who are interested in the field of TBLT (but also in language learning and teaching in general), since it gives them a neatly and didactically presented overview of relevant contributions to the literature in this area.

As far as the answers to the individual research questions are concerned, it can be seen that these learners of English have had vastly heterogeneous experiences with language learning, and while some of them seem to support the TBLT paradigm and claim to have had at times incredibly negative experiences with more traditional, form-focused approaches, others see the traditional, classical humanist paradigm, which is so widespread in this part of the world, as effective and acceptable, since it gives them a feeling of achievement to see, for instance, that they have now covered "everything" there is to know about a certain verb tense or "each and every" function that a particular modal verb has. As a result, even though these learners were mostly receptive to the TBLT paradigm in the actual task-based classroom phase of the study, many of them seem to have scripts that are – at least to some extent – at odds with TBLT, which is definitely a difficulty when it comes to implementing task-based methods in an EFL classroom in this context.

Another key finding is that, probably in accordance with their learning styles, learners seem to react to the implementation of speaking tasks in the classroom very differently. As the author suggests, the take-home message for teachers (and teachers-to-be) would be to understand in what situations this diversity of contributions is acceptable, and when it is necessary to employ new strategies to make task-based learning more effective for the learners. Thus, even though learners' contributions may lead to certain "mismatches" in task implementation, the sheer fact that they interact with each other in various different ways in order to achieve joint learning shows that these contributions can assist the learning process – even if not in ways previously imagined by the teacher.

Furthermore, a finding that is not entirely in line with the results of previous studies on the topic is that communication breakdowns seem to be relatively uncommon in learner interaction, as are negotiation moves that would follow these breakdowns. To explain this, the author cites various studies that show similar results, both for learner–learner interaction in general and for the Hungarian setting in particular. The most interesting arguments that he cites include the deeply rooted and strongly established teacher-fronted tradition in Hungarian education, along with a number of

sociopragmatic characteristics of Hungarian learners that make it undesirable for a learner to halt what they think is the ideal course of interaction just because their individual language learning needs would make it necessary. Instead, what they seem to focus on is the importance of saving one's face, i.e. not standing out negatively in interaction, as well as maintaining an unassuming humility throughout the process of interaction.

To sum up, this is an extraordinarily insightful, and very didactically written volume, and I definitely recommend it both to (aspiring) researchers and EFL teachers(-to-be) if they would like to be informed about TBLT and its related paradigms in general, as well as its situation in the Hungarian education system in particular.