
Language Learning: A Lifelong Process
Joseph Foley and Linda Thompson (2003)
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This book is an introduction to language development that traces language development from infancy to adulthood, concluding with a chapter entitled 'Linguistic biographies' in which the authors state that their study of language learning is concerned with understanding the relation between one's life and the role of language in creating one's life and life experiences. In other words, 'the primacy of the social' (p. 248) in language learning, and the role of language in creating our identities and our lives.

So what is interesting in this text, which the back cover describes as an 'ideal' text? For this reviewer it is principally because it takes a social view of language development, and draws significantly upon the work of Halliday and others in the field of systemic functional linguistics, where the social purpose of language is integral to describing its development and use. It is a useful resource book that highlights key areas in language development, including first language development, communicative competence, a brief look at schema theory, Vygotsky and Halliday. Using the theoretical foundation established in the early chapters, the authors then take a closer look at how children use language to 'get things done' and as a 'resource for learning' and for developing their cognitive abilities. The authors draw on examples from bi- and multi-lingual contexts to support their discussion of the various functions of children's talk. The authors move from the young learner to the school context, where language learning includes the learning of 'educational knowledge' and children are 'initiated into more consciously designed, systematized and explicit ways of reasoning about the world.' (p. 146) The authors develop Halliday's view that language is implicated in all educational activity, that 'becoming educated is essentially a linguistic process' and their references to the work of Neil Mercer will resonate with readers. Once in the school context, the authors develop their discussion around the genres learners encounter in their learning about language through writing. This particular chapter is quite useful in explaining key features of different genres encountered in school. They also include a chapter on critical language awareness, again providing lots of examples with brief, but succinct analyses of different text types. The authors stress the importance of teachers recognizing and making students aware of the ideological and social processes, stereotypes, positioning and power relations in texts. Learning how language is used, in all its modalities, is an essential component of the language learning process that goes on throughout one's life.

In the final chapter the authors present their conceptual framework of how the process of an individual's language development, which is influenced over time, by a variety and range of social and cultural contexts, create unique linguistic biographies. The chapter elaborates this theme, offering an ecological description of language development and then considers how the individual's language development or 'personal linguistic biography' is seen as nested within an ever widening number of influencing contexts, moving outward from the individual. The book's emphasis is on the 'social' in language learning, and draws heavily on the work of Michael Halliday and those who followed in his footsteps. For those who are not very familiar with his work (and others in his field) on language and language learning, this book could be a helpful introduction. It would also be a useful reference for those who are involved in professional development and training.

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