

Review: Henshaw, Florencia and Maris Hawkins. *Common Ground: Second Language Acquisition Theory Goes to the Classroom*.

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As graduate students and professional educators with an interest in the teaching and learning of Spanish and Portuguese, the readership of the *Spanish and Portuguese Review* likely has already and will continue to confront the perpetual issue of the “research and practice divide” in the field of language teaching. Though at some level teachers and second language acquisition (SLA) researchers are working towards a shared objective (i.e., understanding how language learning works in an effort to improve teaching and learning), researchers and teachers, which are not mutually exclusive categories, are often conceptualized in opposition of one another, each lamenting the practices, the efforts, and (mis)understandings of the other. Even when designed with the classroom context in mind (i.e., Instructed Second Language Acquisition, or ISLA), research publications are often inaccessible to potentially interested teacher readers because they are jargon-heavy, many thousands of words in length, and nearly always behind a paywall.

In their groundbreaking (pun intended) new book, Florencia Henshaw and Maris Hawkins offer a perspective that disrupts the common deficit narrative around the “divide” between SLA researchers and language educators. By focusing on *Common Ground*, the book seeks to synthesize SLA research through the lens of experienced language educators, demonstrating to readers that research and practice can exist in symbiosis, and that research can be meaningfully engaged to the benefit of language teachers and learners. Henshaw and Hawkins demonstrate their mastery of “making input comprehensible” in the way they elaborate on research and connect findings in actionable ways to the classroom. Bringing their depth of understanding of SLA as well as their wealth of experience as practicing teachers and teacher-educators to this accessible text, the authors have produced a resource that will be of interest to novice and veteran language teachers as well as teacher-trainers. They transform research findings into digestible, actionable chunks of information followed by illustrative examples applicable to a variety of instructional contexts, providing overviews of key research areas as well as a by-chapter set of valuable discussion questions for readers to reflect on individually and with colleagues.

Each chapter of the text is divided into three sections: “What do I need to know?”, “What does it look like in the classroom?”, and “Now that you know.” The first section can be thought of as the “input”—the overview of SLA research, particularly from scholars including Bill VanPatten, Stephen Krashen, Merrill Swain, Mike Long, Nina Spada, Patsy Lightbown, and Rod Ellis, among others. The second section offers multiple opportunities to connect the content of the first section to experiences readers have likely had in their classrooms. This is primarily achieved with the plethora of rich examples of applications and implications of the research discussed for a variety of classroom contexts provided in this section. The third section points readers towards the future, allowing them to “reflect forward” and make action plans to test out what they have learned and continue reflections and discussions beyond the content of the book.

In chapter one, “Guiding Principles,” the authors start by establishing common ground with the reader by defining and exemplifying the set of key terminology upon which the remainder of the book is based, including acquisition, communication, and the roles of input and output for language development. The authors also explain their understanding of the key roles of the teacher in the additional language (AL) classroom and provide evidence for some of the fundamental differences between first and additional language acquisition. This chapter prepares the reader with a solid foundation for engaging with the material in the subsequent five chapters.

Chapter two, “Goals and Assessment,” begins with an accessible overview of the ACTFL¹ Proficiency Guidelines, reminding readers of the complex realities of the classroom and the critical need for realistic expectations in both our goals and the assessments we use to determine achievement of these goals. The authors also engage the reader with an important discussion of alignment and misalignment of instruction and assessments, emphasizing that these two elements should be in a reciprocal relationship for maximal effectiveness. This chapter also includes a nuanced discussion about the benefits and the challenges of Integrated Performance Assessments (IPAs). Henshaw and Hawkins emphasize that there are more options than discrete point tests or IPAs and remind us that these are just two choices among many for assessing outcomes in the classroom.

Chapter three, “Input,” focuses on the role of input in building learners’ linguistic systems. By providing clear definitions and distinctions between key terms as well as a repertoire of tools for delivering and modifying input for processability, the authors empower teachers to reflect on the amount and quality of input available in their classrooms and possibly adapt their practice to increase this key element of AL acquisition (the necessity of which is emphasized by the

1 ACTFL, formerly the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, is the national professional organization for world language educators in the United States.

authors in multiple places in the chapter). The authors also offer a balanced, undogmatic discussion of so-called “authentic resources” and their benefits and drawbacks as sources of input in the classroom. Also of note in this chapter are strategies and considerations for engaging learners so that the processing of input is maximized, including an extensive treatment of structured input activities. In addition, the chapter includes an overview of “Focus on Form” and “Focus on Forms,” two different approaches to grammar instruction, and provides arguments in favor of the former over the latter for the proficiency-oriented AL classroom.

Chapter four, “Reading, Listening, and Viewing,” focuses on the interpretive mode, particularly on meaning-making and form-meaning connections via the input available in different kinds of “texts,” broadly defined. The authors overview the two kinds of processing (i.e., bottom-up and top-down) as well as the various ways in which different kinds of knowledge (e.g., linguistic, background) impact comprehension and form-meaning mapping. The authors also briefly touch on strategy instruction with the interpretive mode in this chapter and conclude with multiple examples to bring everything together in pre-interpretive, during-interpretive, and post-interpretive tasks.

Chapter five, “Output,” focuses on the role of output in language development, emphasizing that output plays important roles alongside input in the development of additional language proficiency. This chapter includes topic areas like scaffolding output tasks, the role of feedback in output as it might help facilitate proficiency development, and the reiteration of the importance of realistic expectations for learners’ output as their so-called interlanguage develops (connecting back to chapter two).

The final main chapter in the book, chapter six, “Interaction,” explores the roles of interaction in additional language development. Similar to chapter five, strategies for scaffolding and an overview of the role of feedback during interaction are discussed. The chapter also emphasizes negotiation, a key construct in the Interaction Hypothesis, as interlocutors are likely to negotiate both linguistic form and intended meaning in interactions in any language. The authors conclude the chapter with a framework and a variety of examples of interaction-based tasks, mostly from research on Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), before providing their customary wealth of examples in the section focused on classroom applications of theory.

The sequencing of the six chapters is noteworthy in its intentionality on the part of the authors. First, they paint a “big picture” with overarching themes from SLA research and their own classroom experience, then remind readers of the importance of intentional planning across proficiency levels and levels of granularity (e.g., courses, units, daily class meetings). Instructional planning should begin with the identification of clear objectives and assessment tasks,

before designing the input, interaction, and output experiences, which will move the learners from their current level onwards and upwards.

Overall, Henshaw and Hawkins offer a concise, readily accessible summary of key research through the through the lenses of two practicing classroom teachers. This is no small feat, and the practical orientation of this text makes it one that will have far-reaching impact among language teachers. If any criticism is to be raised about the book, it is that the authors could possibly have included a greater range of research. A number of prominent figures from the past and present of (I)SLA are missing from the text, including Diane Larsen-Freeman, Nick Ellis, Paul Nation, Robert De Keyser and Ron Leow, among others. Chapter three, for example, could have included information about the Usage-Based theory of how linguistic systems emerge, which sees language as an open, complex, dynamic system (e.g., the work of Nick Ellis and Diane Larsen-Freeman). This chapter could also have dealt more directly with vocabulary research (from scholars including Paul Nation, Frank Boers, Stuart Webb, etc.). Chapter six might have acknowledged the contentions around the role of explicit language instruction, particularly in instructed contexts (e.g., the work of Robert De Keyser and Ron Leow). The choice to limit the scope of the book is understandable from the perspective of keeping the length of the text manageable. Presenting the somewhat divergent perspectives of scholars like De Keyser or Leow vs. Long or VanPatten could easily double the length of this text. But readers should be aware that additional important perspectives and findings abound in the field of ISLA, and that many areas touched on in this book await further exploration and discussion according to some prominent researchers and teacher-educators in the field. Even Lightbown and Spada, for example, whose work is prominently featured in the book, are cautious to not entirely discount the possibility of a facilitative role of explicit language instruction for some learners in some contexts. Perhaps a follow-up volume will explore some of these topics and issues in greater depth. Either way, the authors are to be commended for their effort, and this book is an invaluable resource. Whether you are a new teaching assistant or a veteran language instructor, you will benefit from this book. There is *Common Ground* for language teachers and researchers to meet in the middle and move forward together on—all we need to do is take the first step, and this book is a great place to start!