Key Questions in Language Teaching: An Introduction

By A. G. Benati (2020)

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 214pp.

Reviewed by Hassan Mohebbi

Language teaching is a field where we witness many publications that aim to shed light on its different aspects. However, one of the main problems with such publications is that most of them focus on one limited aspect of language teaching, which results in their not being particularly useful for language teachers. It is evident that the potential target audience of the vast majority of these books are researchers; even if we suppose that the authors also have teachers in mind, regrettably, the book's discourse is too technical to be easily read by teachers.

One of the most recent published books is *Key Questions in Language Teaching: An Introduction* by Alessandro G. Benati, published by Cambridge University Press, which employs a different underlying philosophy, making the book a handy resource for language teachers. Alessandro Benati has already authored other seminal works, namely, *Key Questions in Second Language Acquisition: An Introduction* (VanPatten, Smith and Benati, 2019) and *Key Terms in Second Language Acquisition* (VanPatten and Benati, 2015), which are of benefit for both language teachers and researchers. In a recent article, Benati (2020) also elaborates at length on the role and nature of language and language development.

Key Questions in Language Teaching: An Introduction is based on robust research, theory and experimental findings. As Alessandro Benati highlights, the book avoids technical language and jargon. Having put the book's methodology into practice, I can confirm that it is user-friendly and easy to read, understand and operationalise in the language learning classroom.

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The book consists of six main chapters, with each chapter focusing on one specific and well-defined aspect of language teaching. The six chapters are followed by a final chapter, Chapter 7, which sums up the book's key questions. The book also includes a prologue, an epilogue, a glossary and a list of references and readings. The book starts with a well-written prologue, which provides a comprehensive view of the book and explains each chapter's mission, in contrast to most similar books that only list the chapters mechanically.

The first chapter addresses second language acquisition's key underlying theories; that is, behaviourism, the Universal Grammar theory, the monitor theory, the processability theory, the input processing theory, the skill acquisition theory, the complexity theory, and the sociocultural theory, and their relevance and implications for second language teaching. Then, the similarities and differences between first and second language acquisition are explained. Also, the role of input, output and instruction in second language acquisition are debriefed. The chapter ends with the implications of the related themes covered in this chapter for teachers and teaching.

Chapter 2 narrates the evolution of second language teaching methodology – most importantly, the main principles and pedagogical procedures of each methodology: the grammar translation method, the direct method, the audiolingual method, the total physical response method, the natural approach, the communicative language teaching approach, content and language integrated learning, and task-based language teaching are explained thoroughly. Having read this chapter, the reader has a much clearer picture of the different language teaching methodologies we have witnessed in the last decades. The final section of the chapter (Recap) speaks for itself; it summarises the chapter's main points precisely.

Benati, in the third chapter, focuses on the nature and role of communication and interactive tasks in speaking and writing. In this chapter, the exclusive use of question and answer and open-ended questions for eliciting output from learners is criticised. Accordingly, tasks are recommended to take the place of mechanical exercises and activities. In this chapter, communication and its different aspects are highlighted, in order to help teachers to understand the importance and effectiveness of communicative and interactive tasks. Moreover, the speaking task and its different classifications, such as information exchange, jigsaw, information-gap and problem-solving, are elucidated. Benati also discusses practical writing tasks. The last section of the chapter throws light upon the nature and role of writing, the cognitive-process approach, and the pre-writing and writing stages of interactive writing tasks. The most notable aspect of this

chapter is the discussion and questions: a collection of well-designed tasks and questions to support the teacher in gaining practical knowledge for designing writing tasks in language learning classrooms.

Chapter 4 is devoted to listening and reading comprehension tasks. The chapter begins with the role of input, the nature and role of listening, and bottom-up and top-down strategies. Benati then presents the procedure for developing interactive listening tasks. The listening text, pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening phases are explained. The second part of the chapter covers the development of reading comprehension tasks. In a similar vein, the nature and role of reading comprehension, the main strategies involved in reading, namely, bottom-up and top-down strategies and the schema theory, are raised. Then, by providing an example, the procedure for designing an interactive reading task is presented as a five-stage approach: pre-reading, reading, text-interaction, post-reading and personalisation.

Chapter 5 is dedicated to grammar, vocabulary and corrective feedback. In this chapter, the available options on the table for teaching grammar, including input-based and structure-based focused options, are illustrated. The related issues about vocabulary are then explained briefly. The most important section of the fifth chapter is related to corrective feedback, where the role and various oral corrective feedback strategies are presented.

Chapter 6 aims to give an insight into second language research. Benati tries to explain the related research designs, namely, action research, experimental research, observation and case study, which may be used in language teaching-related research. This section is followed by an illustration of the main data collection instruments: observation schemes, questionnaires, interviews, self-paced reading and listening, cross-modal priming, eye-tracking with text, and event-related potentials. The chapter ends with a brief overview of the main research procedures.

Last but not least, Chapter 7 presents an overall evaluation of the key questions covered in this book. In this chapter, the author poses several questions and tries to give convincing and precise answers. The questions covered are as follows: What do we know about second language acquisition that is useful for language teachers and teaching? Is there a particular language teaching method or approach better than others? Is there a particular type of speaking/writing interactive/listening comprehension/reading comprehension task better than others? Is there a particular type of explicit information (rules explanation) better than others? Is there a particular pedagogical intervention to grammar instruction more effective than others? Is there a particular type of error correction better than others? The last chapter is accompanied by an epilogue, a glossary of key

terms, and references and readings in line with other books available on the market.

Without a shadow of a doubt, this book should be recommended for inclusion in the curricula of graduate and postgraduate language teaching programs, and it provides practical and professional insights into language teaching for early-career teachers. It should be mentioned that the book also has the potential to be read more than once during the lifelong professional journey of a teacher. The book's most notable characteristic is its evident simplicity and readability, which makes the book a handy resource for language teachers. More importantly, each chapter's organisation and the tasks supplied – in particular, the 'consider this ...' and 'agree or disagree' tasks – provide a brainstorming opportunity for readers to ponder each chapter's main theme. Most importantly, the 'discussion and questions' section triggers a deep analysis and review of each chapter's content.

This notwithstanding, a potential future edition of the book could benefit from some revisions. It would be beneficial if independent chapters could be devoted to oral and written corrective feedback, because giving feedback is one of a teacher's most important and demanding tasks. A vast majority of early-career teachers face challenges in adopting the most effective strategy in correcting the oral and written output of language learners. Having had experience of this, I believe it makes sense to devote separate chapters to vocabulary and grammar. Surprisingly, only two pages are devoted to explaining vocabulary, which is by no means enough.

Moreover, as we are currently caught up in the COVID-19 pandemic, it goes without saying that we need to lend a helping hand to teachers, since much of mainstream language education has been transferred to an online platform. Consequently, adding online resources for teaching and testing each language teaching aspect covered in this book could augment the book's usefulness. It is recommended that the author might add the related discussion on each task's delivery to an online platform for each chapter. Including chapters that would shed light on computer and mobile-assisted language teaching and testing could help teachers who lack pedagogical knowledge and literacy in online teaching. It is tempting to suggest that the author might go on to compile a similar book entitled *Key Questions in Language Testing: An Introduction*.

References

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