
Breaking the Language Barrier

Review by Bill Schweers

University of Puerto Rico at Bayamon

BREAKING THE LANGUAGE BARRIER. H. Douglas Brown. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1991. US \$14.95

In spite of what some commercial language teaching programs may try to make us believe, second languages are not learned in 30 hours or after listening to a set of 10 tapes. Developing communicative competence in a second language requires long hours of work, time, and persistence. Anyone involved in language teaching knows this, but given the onslaught of advertising to the contrary, it's good to remind ourselves of this reality from time to time. This is what H. Douglas Brown does masterfully in his book *Breaking the Language Barrier*.

This book realistically outlines what is involved in second language learning, yet it is upbeat and does not discourage the potential learner from giving it a try. Its message is that if you are persistent and seek out the appropriate learning contexts and techniques, you can be successful. The volume also offers a thorough overview of many of the basic principles of second language acquisition theory. This is presented in terms that the layman can easily follow.

Brown begins by reviewing how infants learn to speak their first language, discussing such concepts as the critical period, language as a tool for survival, the subconscious internalization of language, and the roles of comprehension and frequency of input in language learning. Brown emphasizes that children don't learn a first language by magic; it requires time, attention, concentration, and effort. He ends by listing ten insights from the first language acquisition process which are relevant to second language learning.

In the next chapter Brown explores child second language learning and contrasts it with first language acquisition. He concludes that, rather than comparing it with L1 acquisition, it is more useful to compare child L2 acquisition with adult acquisition of a second language. Again, he lists the strategies which can be gained from child learners and which are relevant to adult learning. These include: not worrying about attaining a native-like accent, not thinking too much about the language being learned, and not letting fears of making mistakes interfere with learning. Brown points out that although the first language is always behind the scenes influencing second language learning, we should not let it overwhelm us. Although analogies and comparisons can be useful mnemonic devices, we must strive to free ourselves as much as possible from the L1. Finally, he

suggests that adult learners must turn their natural tendencies upside down and put social relationships first, communication second, and grammatical correctness last.

In what follows, Brown presents nine practical principles involved in learning how to learn a language. He lists six of what he terms strategies for success. These include: becoming aware of our cognitive styles and discovering the specific strategies which best complement them, getting our two brain hemispheres to work together, finding a balance between field dependence and independence, learning to tolerate ambiguity, and putting receptivity above perceptivity in gathering information about the second language.

Next, Brown discusses the affective side of language learning and concludes that the emotions often play a determinant role in this process. He points out the need to believe in ourselves, to defend ourselves from assaults on our "language ego," to shed our inhibitions, to take risks, and to deal with foreign language anxiety. He suggests that we approach language learning as a game and recommends some useful games which facilitate language learning. At the end of this chapter, Brown considers how we can increase motivation by using language learning to meet a series of basic ego needs.

Brown ends by going over how we can make our mistakes work for us and by reviewing the principle classroom methodologies used in second language instruction. He encourages the learner to choose the method which goes best with his or her personal learning styles and needs. Finally, Brown presents a series of tests of characteristics related to effective language learning. This allows the reader to evaluate his or her potential and style as a language learner. These include tests of extroversion, ambiguity tolerance, left- and right-brain preferences, and visual and auditory learning. The final test is a language puzzle which examines the learners' ability to decipher vocabulary from an unknown language giving us an indication of one's potential as a second language learner.

Breaking the Language Barrier offers a realistic look at the second language learning process. It also offers abundant advice and practical techniques the learner can use to become an effective L2 learner. While not offering quick-fixes, this book portrays the language learning process as both stimulating and doable. If we make an informed and determined effort, anyone can join the "second-language club," taking on a new identity and becoming increasingly proficient in an additional language. The rewards are abundant, and perhaps the greatest is, as Brown says, "participating in, and celebrating, human diversity." Anyone undertaking the learning of a new language should take a serious look at *Breaking the Language Barrier*.

About the Reviewer

Bill Schweers has taught ESL for 27 years and has resided in Puerto Rico for the past 16 years. He holds a Ph.D. in TESOL from New York University. His research interests are language transfer and language planning. He has served as the editor and assistant editor of the Puerto Rico TESOL-Gram.