

Review

Language learning environments: Spatial perspectives on second language acquisition (a review)

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We think we know about *who* learns languages, *why* they learn and *how* they learn but how much do we know about *where* they learn? What is the influence of space on language learning? How does the learning environment influence the learning of languages? That is the theoretical question asked by Phil Benson. Benson, who is Professor of Applied Linguistics at Macquarie University in Australia and Director of Macquarie's Multilingual Research Centre, has undertaken a theoretical study of space and environment and its role in languages and second language learning.

The book has six chapters on the *where* of second language acquisition (SLA), theories of space, linguistics and the spatiality of language, language bearing assemblages, language learning environments and space and SLA environments. It is a book for language and intercultural researchers and as Diane Larsen-Freeman, Professor Emerita at the University of Michigan, writes, '*where second language learning takes place makes a difference – an important lesson for SLA researchers to heed*'.

Benson's research covers a wide range of understandings of the role of space in language. Benson presents his argument in six chapters. Following his chapter explaining the *where* of second language learning (Chapter 1), he goes on to examine theories of space in Chapter 2 followed up by the role of linguistics and the spatiality of language in Chapter 3, the understanding of language bearing assemblages in Chapter 4 and their application in language learning environments in Chapter 5. In Chapter 6 he looks at concepts of space and language learning research on the learning environment both inside and outside the classroom and its impact on the success or failure of language learning. With its list of references and an index at 147 pages, it is not a long book, but it is theoretical and quite dense.

Apart from looking at the theory and understanding of space itself in Chapter 3, Benson explains that although globalisation has created demand for second languages and created space between languages that are taught as a second lan-

guage and those that are not, his prime concern is with the language learning environment. As he puts it, his aim is to provide an alternative to a language as an object *in space*, packaged with textbooks, grammars, dictionaries and language learning materials but also to make the case for languages as space, allowing a different view of what second language acquisition entails. What he aims to do is to establish a framework for the study of spatial differences and their influence on second language issues. He proposes that we should not see a language as an object in space as theories of linguistics tend to do but to see language as a space in itself.

For Benson second language acquisition begins with global mobility. He introduces the concept of language bearing assemblages, describing it as the movement of people, goods and information around the globe and sees learning as a different set of assemblages of learners, learning resources and learning environments. He states that it is *'because second language learning is inextricably bound up with movements of people, places and information on a global scale that the spatial concepts of language learning are so important'* and quotes Soja's assertion that *'space matters'*. Interestingly enough, he notes how concepts of second language acquisition have changed as result of pandemic induced regulations, including lockdowns, curfews, international border controls and domestic and international travel restrictions. On the other hand, Covid-19 has opened up areas of online communication allowing the development of distant and local personal and professional relationships as never before. Once again, as he puts it, the pandemic, *'has been a sharp reminder of how much space matters.'*

Chapter 5 is the most important one for language teachers and researchers into the practice of language teaching and learning as it addresses the core issues of the environment where languages are learned and the way *where* learning takes place can affect learner engagement and success. Benson identifies two key perspectives on language learning, the geographical environment (a campus, a city or a region) which he describes as

an *'areal perspective'* and the configuration of settings assembled by an individual learner, which Benson describes as an *'individual perspective'*. He also discusses the issue of learning languages online as a learning environment.

In the final Chapter 6 Benson reviews some of the recent research into second language acquisition as an introduction to pointing out future possible avenues of research. He explores interesting papers on case studies in China, Hong Kong and the Philippines.

So, where should research into the *where* of SLA go next? Benson identifies three key areas. First is the multicultural environment where cities have populations speaking lots of different languages so that ideas of identity, what constitutes social cohesion and approaches to learning differ. These spatial environments need research and understanding to see how learners of second languages can come together for mutual benefit. Second is the growth in informal learning, particularly using online learning resources. These can be used in the classroom or elsewhere, but the key is the use of digital activities that learners can pursue together. Benson cites the work of Alice Chik on how language students could produce a portrait of their favourite city using *Google Maps*. He also cites an activity organised by Antje Wilson and Christian Ludwig getting students of English to explore multilingual landscapes in their neighbourhood and evaluate their potential as resources for language learning. Gaming is a useful online activity for learners, especially using world building games, such as *The Sims*, or role-playing games such as the *World of Warcraft*. The third area of research covers what Benson describes as materiality and environmental engagement. Materiality describes the physical environment of the learning experience and how it can encourage or discourage learner engagement. In language bearing assemblage terminology classroom learning constitutes a *'socio-material assemblage'* of the learners and teacher, the furniture and the physical setup of the classroom, the teacher and way of teaching and the curriculum. These are all spatial factors influencing learner engagement with the language

learning and teaching process. Another important element in the learning process is the process of outside the classroom learning where learners learn from interacting with the environment where the language they are learning is used. In practice, this can often lead to a degree of familiarity and fluency in the language learning process which can be difficult to achieve in the classroom alone.

A key requirement of the spatial understanding of language learning is research into the multiplicity of environments where learners learn and practise both in class and out of class. We need research to move beyond in-class and virtual environments to 'real life' where learners have access to the language as it is actually used. We also need to study the individual experience of lan-

guage learning environments and what encourages or discourages learner engagement and how their own daily lives encourage or obstruct learning. Research is also needed into the visual experience, how creating or observing and analysing visual stimuli can encourage learning. Finally, and interestingly, Benson raises the walking method of research, interviewing learners while walking through familiar and unfamiliar environments where the language being learned is spoken. All these areas and others offer opportunities for further and deeper research into the spatial dimension of language learning and teaching.

A final remark by Diane Larsen-Freeman in the cover blurb concludes this review. '*Your mind will be stretched. I know mine was*'. I agree.

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