

Key Issues in Language Teaching

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Cambridge, UK. Cambridge University Press, 2015

Pages: xxii + 848 (ISBN-13: 978-1-107-45610-5 Paperback)

Reviewed by James Kimball

INTRODUCTION

Looking for a comprehensive resource to help with all of your forays in teacher-education courses and professional development endeavors, one that bridges academic theory and classroom practice? Then start with *Key Issues in Language Teaching*. It really is the one-stop-shopping resource that covers virtually every topic under the TESOL sun. Given that it is 848 pages, it should come as no surprise that the author, Jack Richards, tackles each issue with enough depth and breadth to satisfy a broad audience. That includes teachers in teacher-education programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels as well as those in teacher-training courses such as the Cambridge CELTA and DELTA. Both native speakers and non-native speakers will find the text written in smooth and easy-to-digest prose, including the ample use of charts, diagrams, task samples, and discussion questions. With this in mind, *Key Issues in Language Teaching* should be a core reference text in any professional's library.

SUMMARY

Key Issues in Language Teaching is organized into four sections: (a) English Language Teaching Today, (b) Facilitating Student Learning, (c) Language and the Four Skills, and (d) The Teacher's Environment. Each explores key issues impacting teachers today.

Part 1, English Language Teaching, discusses fundamental issues central to the lives of teachers, including the status of English(s), how languages are learned, methodologies, and the notion of how teacher knowledge and beliefs serve as a catalyst for change. The last chapter in Part 1, Developing knowledge, skills and awareness in teaching, encapsulates the journey of a teacher from novice to expert. Part 2, Facilitating Student Learning, concerns learners, lesson planning and observation schemes, and classroom management. Chapter 7, Managing classroom learning, stands out for its practical application of themes or issues impacting classroom practice. Part 3, Language and the Four Skills, investigates traditional systems and skills that make up the foundation of teacher knowledge: grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, and listening, speaking, reading, and writing. And finally, Part 4, The Teacher's Environment, unites peripheral, top-down issues (curriculum planning, assessment, and professional development pathways) with all of the previous bottom-up concepts.

EVALUATION

Where does *Key Issues in Language Teaching* sit in regards to other references? Well, it is much more encyclopedic than Thornbury's (2006) *The New A-Z of ELT*, which is more like a dictionary of terms. And it offers more cohesiveness than *Methodology in Language Teaching: An Anthology of Current Practice* (Richards & Renandya, 2002). In short, it is a more-than-adequate middle ground between a collection of articles and book-length treatment of a topic.

Most notable is how it connects theory with practice. It is not a deep dive into research or theory; it caters to practicing classroom teachers and managers by consolidating critical issues in language teaching. This text is a very hands-on resource, with activities worth doing and perhaps keeping a diary or notebook while reading.

Secondly, it is ideal for self-study and introspection. Throughout the book, there are discussion questions at the end of each chapter. These are springboards for rumination. Some are reflective in nature: "Do you make use of descriptions of aims and objectives when planning lessons?" Others are hands-on tasks: "Examine two coursebooks of a similar level and compare the range of grammatical items they include and the way they are taught." Throughout the book, there are opportunities to stop

and think about the topic under discussion. This is where text is interrupted by a box with a question mark (?), followed by a pertinent question in bold. This forces readers to stop and actively engage in the reading process rather than passively consume knowledge.

There are 40 pages of up-to-date, seminal references that include books and articles. This is a goldmine of information. Not only is it fun to just read through and earmark listings for future reading projects, but it is the first place to start when writing a paper or engaging in action research. There is an Index, too. Before attending conferences or seminars, it is a useful tool to navigate and investigate. The Glossary is 22 pages but it is rather terse.

While Jack Richards is the author, there are contributions from other teacher trainers from around the world who provide vignettes showcasing the practical application of a theory, answer questions in their context, or support a topic through relevant action research projects. Some readers may find these tangential or extraneous. However, despite their relevance (or not) to the Korean context, they do offer opportunities for readers to form or imagine their own responses.

Paperback or E-book?

Technology marches on, so *Key Issues in Language Teaching* is available in both paperback and e-book editions. Although the choice is a personal one, it is worth pointing out relevant issues to consider. The paperback is heavy and slightly unwieldy – and that is a decidedly positive attribute! The paper quality feels crispy and tangible, making for a better reading experience compared to other books its size using wafer-thin tissue paper. And the layout, with its large print size and wide-enough line spacing, is perfect for readers who have weak eyes. Regrettably, given its weight, it is not the ideal reference to carry in your briefcase or backpack.

Regarding the e-book, it is convenient and accessible. Searching is a breeze. Searches can be done by word or page number. And when highlighting a word, you can instantly search the web or Wikipedia for a more narrow reading experience. Embedded in the text are two-minute videos from the author introducing each chapter's content. Unfortunately, the lack of highlighting and notetaking functionality is a disappointment. And finally, the thumbnails at the bottom are impossibly small for modest-sized fingers to manipulate. Nevertheless, having an e-book edition

to take to meetings, conferences, and cafes is the epitome of modern convenience. All ELT publishers should follow suit and embrace the migration to digital reading platforms.

CONCLUSION

Key Issues in Language Teaching is a welcome addition to any teacher's core collection of professional resource books. It can be read from beginning to end, or cherry-picked for any issue or theme that piques interest. Moreover, the references are core, seminal reads to follow-up on when doing a literature review for research. Whether new to the field or a classroom veteran, *Key Issues in Language Teaching* is bound to offer new insights on how theory informs practice and, ultimately, spark enthusiasm for teaching. Part of a teacher's identity is to grow and change over the years. One way to do that is to acquire a more extensive knowledge base and cultivate a skillset of effective classroom routines. *Key Issues in Language Teaching*, then, is one means of affecting change and transformation.

THE REVIEWER

James Kimball holds an MSc in educational management in TESOL from Aston University, and his research interests include program evaluation and classroom dynamics. Taking part in teacher development activities has been a long-time interest. He is an assistant professor of English in the Liberal Arts Department of Semyung University in Korea. Having an interest in classroom dynamics, he formed the KOTESOL Classroom Management Special Interest Group.

REFERENCES

- Richards, J., & Renandya, W. (Eds.). (2002). *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice*. Cambridge University Press.
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