Book Reviews

Reflections on Pinker

The Language Instinct

Steven Pinker (1994). Penguin Books Ltd., London, 494 pages.

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Pinker is not a comparative form of the color, but it is about grammar. Steven Pinker is a Canadian born experimental psychologist whose book The Language Instinct was published in 1994 while he was professor in the Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences in MIT. In it, he explains how the brain works when people learn languages.

Pinker has two main objectives: to explain what language is like, and what minds are like. Together, his concepts of language and mind serve to illuminate many aspects of language learning and usage. His target readership is the well-educated non-specialist, and he expresses difficult ideas with lucidity. But the specialist will not be disappointed either; there are 430 footnotes and 26 pages of detailed references. Most of his examples are taken from English. This is hardly surprising as most of the research has been done on English speaking subjects and reported in English, but he makes wide reference to other languages too. The weight of Pinker's arguments comes from his work as an active researcher combined with highly entertaining and illuminating examples from the world we all live in. As science advances and research becomes more specialized, we often feel that academics and scientists are remote from everyday problems. But Pinker is one of a growing number of specialists who are prepared to test their ideas in the open, subject to

their readers' prejudices and concepts of sense and nonsense, of worth and worthlessness. This is surely to be welcomed.

To describe language he makes use of clear diagrams showing how simple branching structures can represent all the complexities of possible constructions in human languages. These ideas are derived from Chomsky, whose stature as the originator of the idea of a universal grammar is fully acknowledged. What is new here is the clarity and force of the explanation, supported by a wide range of concrete examples.

As for the origins and workings of the mind, Pinker's views are firmly Darwinian. He shows, again with clear examples, how evolution by natural selection fully accounts for the ways in which the human mind handles language functions. Anyone who doubts the force of the argument for evolution by natural selection should read Richard Dawkins' book The Blind Watchmaker.

Pinker's book is a detailed investigation of first language acquisition. Its significance for EFL teachers lies in pointing out some of the difficulties inherent in learning any language- first, second or foreign- late in life. For instance, according to Pinker, we should first be clear that people have big brains because they have to handle language learning amongst many other activities, not the other way around (p.363). This means that brains are as big as they need to be for the purposes of their owner. The popular idea that there is spare capacity hanging around unused in the brain is just not true, and in evolutionary terms cannot be true. Childbirth is quite hard enough with the size of head we have: if we could manage with a smaller one we would, to the relief of our mothers. For most people, serious language acquisition happens only once in early childhood. A big part of the brain is needed for this activity, and will later be "recycled" for other necessities: - it is no longer available for language learning.

The implication for EFL teachers is obvious. Foreign language acquisition cannot be like first language acquisition. Pinker tends to take it rather for granted that in fact learning foreign languages is always difficult and the results unsatisfactory: "A few highly talented and motivated individuals master much of the grammar of a foreign language, but not its sound pattern...Even the adults who succeed at grammar often depend on the exercise of their considerable intellects, unlike children, to whom language acquisition just happens." (pp. 290-291) Of course we all have our favorite examples of exceptional ability in students. Maybe we were ourselves brilliant students, but surely our greatest responsibility is to the others whose minds have developed, according to Pinker, in a more normal and more generally useful way.

The implications of the universal grammar idea are not so clear, but as Pinker says (p.32): "The crux of the argument is that complex language is universal because children actually re-invent it, generation after generation- not because they are taught, not because they are generally smart, not because it is useful to them, but because they just

can't help it". It would follow that the driving force behind language acquisition is not the pressing communicative need of the learner but an instinct, and not a permanent one at that.

As EFL teachers, we have tended recently to concentrate on ideas which seem to make language learning easier and more relevant. We call this learner-centered education, we practice communicative teaching methods, and we open self-access centers. It might be as well to remember that we are asking our students to do something difficult, perhaps unnatural, the results of which are often deeply unsatisfactory to the students themselves however much we praise their success at communicating. Pinker shows convincingly that the EFL teacher's favorite argument "You learned one language so you can learn another" is just not true and physiologically cannot be true.

In practical terms, then, what can an EFL teacher do? Perhaps we can be more genuinely learner centered, and doubt more the universality of "communication" as a motivator for our students.

Reference

Dawkins, R. (1986). *The Blind Watchmaker*, New York: Norton.