

MEMORY, MEANING & METHOD

Earl W. Stevick
Newbury House, 1976

Earl Stevick, a well-known and respected person in the field of TESOL, gives us a warm and very human book written to inspire humanistic teaching. At the same time, it challenges the learner to find and use his or her own cognitive-emotional resources. The emphasis is on the learner and how we as teachers can be aware of his or her needs and help to fill them, thereby stimulating effective language learning. Although this book does lead us to rather specific conclusions about our teaching methods, it is, for the most part, open-ended, inspiring us to delve more deeply into the science of TESOL.

In his preface, Stevick relates the comment of a friend who, after reading the book, said to him that it looked like a "report on the literature." Stevick's answer to this is that, although there are frequent references, this wasn't his basic intent. He continues: "...what I have written here is a personal credo -- a statement of beliefs which existed in embryo before I went to the library, but which have become clearer, stronger, and in some respects quite different during four years of reading and experience." I think we can assume from this statement that the basic philosophy behind the book is a dynamic one, always open to evolution in our rapidly evolving, interdisciplinary field.

As the title hints, the book is divided into three parts. In the first section, "Memory", the author has set out to prove that language learning is a "total human experience and not just an oral-aural or cognitive one." The cognitive process, in the opinion of the author, is an integral part of this "total human experience" or "total physical response." (Creative cognitive activity is emotionally charged; therefore, it can be considered a physical response such as indicated by increased skin resistance of subjects hearing emotionally charged words.) The depth of this experience or response directly influences retention, and various contrary factors such as defense mechanisms inhibit retention. Stevick cites research into memory in areas such as chunking, crowding, pacing, and biochemical influences, in order to give background information and to substantiate his argument. The cited research and experiments give valuable insights into the learning process.

"Meaning" is the title of the second section, but the word is not used in this book to mean a "definition". Rather it is used in the fuller sense of the word, something like "significance". What does a particular activity "mean" for a particular learner? What is the

"depth" of the experience? Depth is a word we find used repeatedly in this book to mean the emotional effect an experience might have on a person. Stevick discusses in these chapters such things as motivation, receptivity and defense and how we, as teachers, can try to influence these factors in a positive way. Since the emphasis is always on the needs of the learner, it is of no surprise to find the focus here is on Maslow's Hierarchy of needs together with theories from Transactional Analysis and how we can directly apply them to the language learning situation.

The last section, "Method", gives none of the pat answers that one might be hoping for. This is not a fault in the book, but rather an intentional effort to give a sense of alternatives in a framework of "principles" that generate respect for the learner and his learning necessities. The author then commences to describe his personal view of a number of existing methods showing how they fit or do not fit into these "principles".

His summary chapter, "What I hope for in a classroom", gives some general suggestions with such down-to-earth advice as: "I hope to find the students comfortable and relaxed, even in the midst of intense intellectual activity or vigorous argument." Another of the suggestions enumerated is "I hope to find the students involved in whatever they are doing, contributing to it and getting satisfaction from it on many levels of personality."

In conclusion, Earl Stevick's book can safely be recommended to anyone looking for inspiration and new perspectives (especially psychological) on the language learning process. Each person's conclusions will likely be as personal as Earl Stevick's book is to him.

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