Interview with Marion Williams by Jack Scholes

NR: In 1997 you co-authored a landmark book with Robert Burden called – *Psychology for Language Teachers – A Social Constructivist Approach* – which took a different perspective from the prevailing approaches to educational psychology at the time. How and why was that?

MW: That’s a key question and one that involves quite a story. In 1988 I took up a position at Exeter University running the M.Ed. programme in TESOL. As a qualified primary teacher with a background in education and experience in TESOL, I had become increasingly concerned that the TESOL field did not draw sufficiently on the education literature, and I was particularly interested in exploring what educational psychology had to offer language teachers. One day I went to talk to an educational psychologist working in the department about this issue, which proved to be a momentous day in my life, and the upshot was that we decided to jointly develop and teach a psychology course for the M.Ed. TESOL students. Professor Burden had taken a social constructivist approach to educational psychology which was quite a departure from many of the prevailing approaches in university educational psychology courses. I soon saw the relevance of this to language teaching, and over the next ten years or so we developed our ideas about various aspects of psychology from a social constructivist stance until they culminated in the book in 1997. The whole process of thrashing out our ideas and sharing them with our students and fellow professionals at conferences and through articles was exciting, stimulating, and intellectually very challenging.

NR: In my own workshops, I have often quoted your excellent definition of motivation in this book: “A state of cognitive and emotional arousal which leads to a conscious decision to act, and which gives rise to a period of sustained intellectual and/or physical effort in order to attain a previously set goal or goals” Could you please elaborate on this?

MW: It’s interesting that you homed in on this quotation as it took us some time to develop it. There is a lot written about motivation which we found unhelpful, with learners often seen as needing to be controlled by forces that are external to them such as teachers or parents. Such ‘push-pull’ views will not help learners become autonomous, self-determined individuals, able to take control of their own lives. Our definition takes a cognitive perspective, placing the learner themself at the centre and seeing them as the one in control;
the learner weighs up the information facing them and makes a decision to engage in an action and also the amount of investment to put into that action. As you can see, the definition also includes the element of perseverance, which is generally not referred to in the motivation literature; learning a language needs considerable perseverance and sustained hard grind if learners are to succeed. Methods that see motivation as merely making learning fun are only concerned with the initial stage of stimulation of interest and do not help with understanding how to help learners put in the necessary sustained effort to achieve a goal that they have set themselves. If I am to improve in tennis, which I believe myself to be motivated to do, I need to have a desire to improve, a sense of competence that I am able to improve (a feeling of ‘I can’), and to put in serious effort to practice my strokes.

**NR:** What are the main aspects of current theory and the major findings from recent research about the psychological aspects of second language acquisition?

**MW:** This is a big question. Some key areas currently being investigated are the crucial role of the self in our learning, the link between the self and motivation, the importance of our beliefs and mindsets, our perceptions of our successes and failures, the role of affective factors, the importance of agency and self-regulation, as well as the role of group dynamics. Our book *Psychology for Language Learning* presents a summary of recent findings.

**NR:** In the foreword to the recently published book *Psychology for Language Learning*, which you co-edited, Zoltan Dörnyei says: “the process…(of language acquisition)... is a holistic one, affecting and drawing on the whole range of the learner’s personality features, mindsets, and mental capabilities.” Could you please elaborate on this?

**MW:** As far as I understand, Zoltan is thinking about the holistic and complex nature of learning. Everything about the self influences our learning: our self-concept, our perceptions of our own competence, our personalities, how we interact with others in the group, and the reasons we see for our perceived successes and failures. So, for example, if an individual believes that they are no good at languages, that they are not capable of improving, or that others in the class don’t like them, such beliefs will have a significant impact on that learner’s investment in the learning process. Teachers therefore need to be aware of such issues and help their learners to develop positive perceptions of these aspects. Teaching is about far more than ‘methodology’ or teaching techniques; it is concerned with the whole person.

**NR:** How can teachers acquire a better understanding of learners’ needs, expectations, emotions and beliefs?

**MW:** First, it is important to help learners examine their own beliefs and expectations, to raise their self-awareness, and to engage in dialogue about these. If teachers become aware of students having a low self-esteem or unhelpful beliefs about themselves, then the teachers can ‘coach’ these students in a one to one situation. In my own research into students’ perceptions of reasons for their successes and failures (known as attributions), a number of the students I interviewed felt that their failures were due to a lack of ability; ‘I’m no good’, ‘I’m rubbish at German’, ‘I’m thick’ (Williams et. al. 2004). Learners who see themselves as no good are unlikely to make any effort to improve. Similarly, if students hold what is known as ‘fixed mindsets’ (i.e. they believe that they are unable to improve) as opposed to ‘growth mindsets’, it will be important to work with these students to help them to see that they are able to improve and to set personal goals and develop strategies for progress.

**NR:** You recently co-authored a book with Herbert Puchta entitled – *Teaching Young Learners to Think* (Heilbling Languages). What is the rationale behind the idea of enhancing children’s cognitive abilities at the same time as developing their language skills?

**MW:** This is an area I have been interested in for a long time. As children progress through their education they need to acquire far more than factual knowledge prescribed by school curricula. They need to leave school equipped to face the challenges of a changing and unpredictable world; whatever the world is like now it will be very different in the future, and children will need to develop a range of problem solving and decision making skills to enable them to face new and unexpected problems. I’ve been very much influenced by the many programmes available for teaching children to think; for example, Feuerstein’s ‘Instrumental Enrichment’, and Lipman’s ‘Philosophy for Children’. These programmes are reviewed in our book. I was particularly struck by the way in which many of the activities in these courses lent themselves to language teaching. At the same time, I was becoming increasingly disillusioned with language course books for children, many of which I felt did not provide a suitable cognitive challenge for children and were in danger of switching children off. As a primary teacher I know that children are capable of a high level of thinking; watching a ‘Philosophy for Children’ class is testament to this.

When Herbert Puchta invited me to write a book with him I immediately suggested that we explore the idea of linking the teaching of English with the teaching of thinking. We then set about identifying and exploring different aspects of the thinking process, for example, categorizing, sequencing, cause and effect, decision making, creative thinking, and designed activities that developed each aspect. What resulted is a book of 80 activities with detailed guidelines for teachers as to how to use them.

**NR:** What is involved in the thinking process?

**MW:** Different writers have broken down the thinking process in different ways; a summary of these can be found...
in Williams and Burden, 1997. We based the approach we used in Teaching Young Learners to Think mainly on Blagg et al.’s (2003) model which underpins their ‘Somerset Thinking Skills’ course. Blagg and his co-authors distinguish what they call ‘cognitive resources’ and ‘cognitive strategies’, a distinction we found helpful in developing our activities. Cognitive resources are the basic tools we use in order to think. These include, first, our understanding of concepts such as number, size, shape, time and space, and second, the skills and procedures that we use to solve problems, such as focusing, analyzing, classifying and comparing. Third, we have our knowledge and experience of the world, of the conventions and rules we follow, and of how to work with others, and this knowledge enables us to interpret situations. Fourth, we have the language that we need to communicate and express our meanings successfully. All of these resources can be developed. Equally important are our cognitive strategies, which are the processes we use to select and co-ordinate our use of cognitive resources to address a particular problem. These are the higher-order general control processes involved in thinking, and again, teachers can help learners to develop these. Also important is the way in which we tackle problems. As individuals solve a problem they go through a sequence of gathering and organising information, defining the problem, generating different approaches to solving the problem, planning action and checking solutions. This needs to be carried out thoughtfully and systematically rather than jumping to quick solutions so often prevalent in classrooms. Indeed, Reuven Feuerstein used the strapline ‘Just a minute, let me think’ on his activities, reminding children to take a careful and slow approach. For this reason we have given a lot of attention to how teachers help their learners to take a logical and systematic approach to solving problems.

**NR:** Can thinking be taught? What is the teacher’s role in teaching thinking?

**MW:** This is of course a key question. It is certainly true that thinking can be learnt, and the teacher has a crucial role in facilitating this; good thinking comes from good teaching. I favour a process of scaffolding and ‘mediating’ the learner’s thinking processes, where the teacher breaks the process down and asks questions through the process; What information do we have? What’s the first thing you need to do? Did that work? How do you know? These are explained in Teaching Young Learners to Think.

**NR:** Finally, looking ahead, do you think that the psychological aspects of language learning will become increasingly important in the study of second language acquisition?

**MW:** I personally hope they will become increasingly important in our understanding of second language learning and therefore the way teachers interact with their learners to foster language development and help learners to achieve the goals they set themselves.

**NR:** What are some of the directions for further research?

**MW:** I think there will be a focus on deepening our understanding of issues related to the self, beliefs, and factors associated with these, and I look forward to seeing such development.

Finally, thank you for the chance to express my views which I sincerely hope are of interest to your readers.

**Bibliography**


The interviewee

Marion Williams has been involved in TESOL for 40 years in different parts of the world. She spent 20 years coordinating the postgraduate programmes in TESOL at Exeter University, UK. She has written numerous papers on psychology in language learning and is the co-author of Psychology for Language Teachers (CUP), Thinking Through the Curriculum (Routledge), Psychology for Language Learning (Palgrave Macmillan) and Teaching Young Learners to Think (Helbling). She has just completed a book together with Sarah Mercer titled Multiple Perspectives on the Self.