

FOREIGN LANGUAGES: LESSONS FROM THE PAST AND INNOVATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Celebrating Fifty Years of Foreign Language Teaching in Uganda

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Introduction

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate my colleagues Dr. Edith Natukunda-Togboa and Dr. Enoch Sebuyungo and the other authors for this important achievement and to thank them for having invited me to discuss their book. I must say that reading this book has been a delight for me because whichever page I opened, I found something that concerned me as a language practitioner. Furthermore, I found the papers in this book generally of very good quality, well researched and documented and making use of theoretical tools that have withstood the test of time.

What was even more gratifying for me is that practically all the writers were using, at least in part, their day to day experience in language teaching so I could easily relate with many of the issues they were raising. So I found these articles interesting not only because of the thoroughness and painstaking research that are manifest in many of them but also because of the relevance and realistic nature of what was presented.

The book is divided into four parts as follows: part one deals with *content in a foreign language class*, part two with *pedagogy and foreign languages*, part three with *translation and interpretation* while part four is devoted to *the functionality of foreign languages*.

In part one Natukunda-Togboa and Joel Bertrand handle the issue of teaching gender in a French Beginners' class. I could imagine the beginner in French being greatly intrigued while trying to make a biological connection between a table and its femininity and a tree and its masculinity and how the teacher has to labor to make this student understand that in the overwhelming number cases the gender of a word has nothing to do with its biological attributes if any. Then the student asks for the rationale of one word being masculine and another feminine and that logic is not there. This reminds me of a question I asked a Frenchman teaching us French in the early 70s about the usefulness of verb endings in French (*désinences*) which do not seem to add any further meaning to a conjugated verb and why we couldn't simply do without them. The lecturer glared at me and said: "That's how French is", and continued teaching, visibly irritated. Sebuyungo's article handles students' errors and their causes and I could visualize in his work some of the scripts I was marking many years ago and

