

Swan, Michael. (2005) "[Legislation by Hypothesis: The Case of Task-Based Instruction](#)," in *Applied Linguistics* 26/3:376-401. Oxford University Press.

---

*Betty's comments:*

I loved [this article!](#) Swan is so practical, so down-to-earth, so realistic about what teachers face and must do every day — yet his topic is SLA theory. He focuses on the academic forces that advocate Task-Based Instruction (TBI), but his real focus, it seems to me, is on the role of theory in classroom practice, and the notion that theory often oversells itself, based as it often is on scanty empirical evidence. His article is almost a case study of how we teachers, we on the pragmatic side of the profession, have found ourselves confronted with one SLA theory and method after another, all claiming to be right because they are “research-based.”

*Notable quotes:*

The claim that TBI is a superior teaching approach, solidly based on the findings of current theory and research, cannot be sustained. The hypotheses frequently associated with TBI, to the effect that the second-language acquisition happens exclusively as a result of ‘noticing’ during communicative activity, and is constrained by inflexible developmental sequences, are supported neither by convincing theoretical argument nor by empirical evidence, and are contradicted by common language-learning experience. (p. 396)

Hypotheses are the driving force of scientific progress: they generate research agendas, channel creativity and catalyse discovery. But hypotheses are double-agendas, especially perhaps in disciplines such as ours which are not anchored by a strong empirical base. The theory supporting a fashionable new language-teaching approach easily transmutes into ideology. ... Speculation passes for proved fact, so that it is possible for unvalidated theoretical orthodoxies to become established and to exercise enormous influence on the teaching profession, prescribing and proscribing instructional practice on the basis of nothing better than acts of faith. (p. 387)

*Betty's comments:*

Now, that should make you want to read more! I view [Swan's article](#) as a response from those of us on the pragmatic side of the field to those more focused on the academic side who claim to us that they have the answers, that they know the truth about second language acquisition. As a practitioner, I look to the academic side for information and ideas, not answers, orthodoxy, or ideology. And as a

practitioner interested in research, I know that research regarding the teaching of grammar is often conflicting, and we still have much to learn. I don't believe anyone has all the answers about how and to whom grammar should be taught, so those on the academic side who attempt to say they do have all these answers tend to make me a bit impatient if not downright grumpy.

*Oxford University Press has kindly made [Swan's article](#) available without a subscription to [AzarGrammar.com](#) users. I hope you get the chance to read it. I also hope you'll [weigh in](#) on some of the issues I've raised here.*