

BOOK REVIEW

Steve Smith and Gianfranco Conti, *The Language Teacher Toolkit*, Second Edition

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As the title 'The Language Teacher Toolkit' suggests, Gianfranco Conti and Steve Smith promise to equip educators with devices to help learners absorb languages "through exposure and communication" (p. 13). 'Extensive Processing Instruction (EPI)' (p. 353) has become a buzz word in Modern Foreign Language (MFL) departments. What is 'Contification' and how does this philosophy fit into the context of second language acquisition?

I approach this review with the agenda of investigating how much it benefits language programs within Adult Education. My review is informed by 43 years of language teaching, including Outstanding schools in the United Kingdom (UK). Within the last one, I witnessed the Conti method used successfully across school subjects, even within staff assemblies where the onus was on interaction. The authors' expertise is never brought into question. Whilst Conti's teaching experiences in the UK and Southeast Asia has inspired this methodology, Smith is a former Postgraduate Certificate in Education Lead subject Tutor and 'professional development provider'. Thus, the ultimate adult educator! Notable chapters range from 'Meeting the needs of all students' and Teaching Advanced Level Students, through to 'Subject Knowledge', 'Lesson planning for communication' as well as 'Planning a communicative curriculum'. Aptly, this second edition goes beyond how to simply deliver lessons to awareness about social aspects, like

‘intercultural relations’ on a physical level or through online channels. Students learn through individual, peer to peer, group as well as teacher-led engagements. Such vital integration is also expounded by adult education authors like Nemtchinova’s (2023) and Johnson (2015).

‘The Language Teacher Toolkit’ is as philosophical as it is didactic: it allows for reflection. Whilst academics are treated to a sound critique of teaching theories, the practical educator will be thrilled by its diverse array of activities: engaging, pleasurable, and ludic. Smith and Conti analyse strengths and pitfalls of methodologies in order to validate their preferred ‘lexicogrammatical’ approach. Here, “multi-word chunks” (p. 340) help sensory immersion. Now Andragogy largely, but not exclusively, draws upon the curriculum for those attending evening classes, particularly for anyone wishing to add a General Certificate in Secondary Education or Advanced Level Certificate to their CV. Whilst tenses and grammar remain unchanged, educators may wish to adapt specialized vocabulary, e.g., Business French, to fit into patterns defined by Smith and Conti. Crucially, one notes, at the heart of their ideology, a paradigm shift from a ‘generativist’ reliance on “dictionary and rules” (with vocabulary embedded into a grammatical structure) to a “chunk and chain process” (p. 341). Antiquated Whitmarsh style grammar books are safely relegated to the cellar. In recent textbooks, communication has become the primary focus, with role plays and dialogues based on current events; yet Smith and Conti wish to delve deeper for learners to own a second language. Perhaps the driving force behind this effective bid is that they “recognised that language acquisition happens subconsciously or implicitly, just as when a child picks up their first language(s)” (p. 13).

Like its inherent techniques, this guide has a problem-solving approach. Whilst challenges to learning, such as “cognitive over-load” (p. 358) are indicated, the authors propose clearly presented attention-gripping lexical games which aid retention through ‘sentence building’. Ironically, or perhaps purposefully, the latter, a highlight in its practicality, is not introduced until the reader has been embedded in cognitive insights. One then discovers how language fluency can be obtained via techniques specified as “modelling”, “awareness-raising”, “receptive-processing”, “structured production”, “expansion”,

“autonomy”, “routinisation”, and “spontaneity”, i.e., the “MARS/EARS pedagogical cycle” (pp. 355-357). Non-linguists can be assured that syntactical processes e.g., ‘parsing’, will be explained.

Whilst educators might be lured by intriguing nomenclature such as: ‘The rock-Climbing Game’, so might young adults enrolled in community courses like English as a Second Language. Pertinently, behaviour management has been left out of this second edition once games are designed to enthrall the learner. However, retention is always welcome, as typically those attending classes for their own survival, e.g., for community integration purposes, have their own baggage; and might benefit from distraction; cohesion inherent in ‘Whodunnit’ types of activity might be beneficial. Exercises like ‘Run to the board’ (p. 153) could be avoided in classes where seniors, pregnant women or disabled are concerned; but otherwise, tasks seem adaptable. Given that other tasks seem designed for a snappy pace: ‘Sentence-stealers’ and ‘Oral Ping-Pong’, energy may be required on the leader’s part, so sedentary lecturers might stick to more familiar tasks, albeit with a twist: ‘narrow reading’ and ‘narrow translation’ (p. 340).

In my opinion, this method may require practice to be delivered effectively but is worth the effort. Adult educators may find it time-consuming to adapt power-points in the prescribed fashion but once created, time and resources may be saved in the long run. In a migrant centre, for example, one visualizes a setting in which a functioning whiteboard together with mini whiteboards find themselves populating the classroom, but this works to the educator’s advantage as the goal is on ‘zero-preparation’ (p. 10); minimal marking. Hopefully, directors of adult education programs dreaming of budgeting output can benefit from the educator’s freed time to the learner’s advantage.

Furthermore, such centres might benefit from bonus links to the authors’ websites promoted on page 4. As Andragogy and Heutagogy often go hand in hand, computer literate learners might be likely to explore impressive-sounding Conti’s language-gym.com and Smith’s extensive frenchteacher.net. These digital aids might serve autodidactic learners too. However, some resources require paid subscriptions; so, there are limitations to this valuable extension. In any case, there’s a wealth of

inspiring materials in this very readable compendium fashioned with tables and figures including 'Boxes of Tricks' (p. 205).

A third Edition might do well to provide contacts or in-depth funding tips as to how adult education programs could incorporate scholarships. Spending time in the target country (p. 55) would prove to be the ideal trick! When it comes to Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing, Smith and Conti seem to have faith that adults have an advantage and "some learners - typically adult learners with good analytical skills... (would)... proceduralise declarative knowledge of language over time" (p. 350). Transformation can ensue.

Whilst not professing that this book has an advantage over others in particular (p. 12), Smith and Conti manage to hook in new teachers whilst levelling with seasoned practitioners. I feel that this handbook deserves a place in every MFL department, to be consulted, followed or simply used as a 'toolkit' to inspire more than good practice; to form responsible adults in the throes of forming others.

References

- Johnson, S.M. (2015). *Adult Learning in the Language Classroom*. Bristol: Channel View Publications Ltd.
- Nemtchinova, E. (2023). *Enhancing beginner-level foreign language education for adult learners: Language instruction, intercultural competence, technology, and assessment* (1st ed.). New York: Routledge.