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Teaching and Learning in the Language Classroom

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Teaching and Learning in the Language Classroom

Tricia Hedge (2000)

Oxford Handbooks for Language Teachers

Oxford: Oxford University Press

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A quarter of a century ago, Tricia Hedge gave me a thorough and careful introduction to the teaching of English at an adult-teaching organisation in Uppsala, Sweden. She was leaving for a teaching career in Education. In teacher education she seemed to find the perfect field for her talents, and she was developing her ideas and teacher-training skills on courses and seminars for teachers in the field. She produced a comprehensive book on language teaching; and with such a wealth of experience behind it, that book has to be worth careful examination.

Teaching and learning in the language classroom is aimed primarily at language teachers who are useful for teachers to explore on their own, its main use is likely to be as a core textbook or

encourages teachers to reflect on issues in language teaching and learning on the basis of an “introductory task” which focuses thought on the area to be considered and which in turn challenges their current ideas and practice on the issue. Similarly, the penultimate section of each chapter is “Activities and projects”, many of which are based on examples of teaching materials. These activities are designed to be done in groups, and the most obvious way in which to exploit them is on a formal training course.

In between these discussion tasks, each chapter produces a highly concentrated but still readable text on issues under consideration. Though the main subheadings in each chapter take the form of questions such as “How do we acquire vocabulary?” or “What role can self-access facilities play in language learning?”, they are not specifically addressed to the reader. The general pattern of each chapter is to present considerations, and Hedge draws on both research and published teaching materials in reaching her conclusions drawn are often fairly tentative, though; this is not a book which implies that the answers to the questions that concern language teachers, or which sets out to provide simplistic classroom practice that teachers should end up making more informed choices and decisions, but they will still be “decision-makers in managing the classroom process” (1), and it is not her aim to usurp the current classroom practices which she believes to be ideal. As she says in the introduction, her book is “not for the feet of educationists and applied linguists waiting for ideas to drop, like crumbs, to sustain them; it is more robust and independent than that” (2). She recognises that neither theoretical nor classroom practice are “principles of classroom practice”. Her aim is to help provide “a foundation of knowledge and understanding about teaching and learning, to which we can apply for insights in our attempts to solve problems in our own classrooms” (*ibid.*). Such an approach should also be seen in the structure of the book.

Language teaching practice has seen the emergence of various diverse—and in some respects conflicting—views over the last few decades, and it is by no means easy to design a coherent course for teachers which encompasses all these views. To be learned, differing views of the language learning process, differing ideas on language teaching, and differing ideas on a fairly conventional but very logical way, which can conveniently be used to provide the outline of a course. The book is a “A framework for teaching and learning”; the first chapter of this section covers a mass of issues, including theories, learner differences, and the roles of teachers, learners and teaching materials. It is a fairly thin side, but the chapter is essentially laying the foundation for the rest of the course. There are plenty of opportunities to return to these issues later. Part 1 also contains chapters on “Learner autonomy and learner training”; it may be a little surprising to find these topics covered in a separate part, but it works well enough. Part 2, “Teaching the language system”, looks at teaching language structure, including grammar and “Grammar”, while Part 3, “Developing the language skills”, has chapters on each of the four skills. These examinations from two different angles of what is to be taught provide overlap with the first part and expansion. Part 4, “Planning and assessing learning”, covers the two topics that always seem to go together, such as this, namely course design and classroom assessment (a concept preferred here to the more traditional positive process of monitoring learning which includes testing as one of its tools). The chapters are written by Dickens.

Even just surveys of each of the areas covered by the 11 chapters could easily form separate material is crammed into 447 pages, with a substantial number of these being accounted for. The book suggests further reading, a glossary (very useful), bibliography, index, introduction, etc. The text is quite compressed. It is a credit to the writer that the style remains clear and comprehensible despite the demands that readers concentrate hard and think carefully about the text during reading, integrating them into their mental picture of the teaching and learning processes. The argument is presented in a book to be digested in fairly small sections. Again, it is ideally suited to accompanying a course or follow-up to seminar sessions and discussions held over a number of weeks.

If I were running a training course for experienced teachers such as one leading to the British Certificate of Education, I would be happy using this book as a central text book, and indeed I expect that it will rapidly become a standard text. It challenges teachers to consider, justify and perhaps rethink their classroom practices with respect to their right to their own views. It provides copious ideas and examples of teaching material and links between theoretical research on language learning and classroom practice without suggesting that the former dictate classroom methodology. It provides a good outline course structure without forcing one imposed by the book author. And while the author's own voice comes through clearly, it also makes every effort to leave issues open to debate. Some might even think that occasionally it lists advantages and disadvantages too scrupulously, but personally I much prefer this approach.

The cover blurb and the introduction suggest that the book can be used in other ways, for example as a text for individual teachers, a sourcebook for teacher educators, or as an introduction to the professional literature. "An overview of theory and practice" (3). It is indeed a surprisingly adaptable text, and I have used it in an academic course about English Language Teaching for university students of English who have no actual teaching experience. However, I do think that only teachers with some solid classroom experience and that similarly only those able to devote time to its study and to discuss the ideas in it with colleagues in courses—will get the best possible use from it.

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