

Interaction and Language Learning: Case Studies in TESOL Practice Series

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INTERACTION AND LANGUAGE LEARNING: CASE STUDIES IN TESOL PRACTICE SERIES. Jill Burton and Charles Clennell, Eds. Alexandria, VA: TESOL, 2003, 200 pp., ISBN 1-931185-050-0. \$29.95 (member \$24.95)

Let's be clear about one thing right away: This is not the book you reach for when you are in urgent need of an emergency lesson plan twenty minutes before class time. Although generated by teaching practice and ripe with interesting implications for the classroom, for the most part the case studies in this volume require the careful and unhurried attention of a thoughtful reader. They are best absorbed at a slight distance from the ebb and flow of classroom experience, perhaps in a weekend of reflection on its dynamics, or as part of a longer program of pedagogical study.

The premise uniting the various cases in this book, each of them represented by a separate chapter, is the crucial importance of interaction in the process of language learning. The term "interaction" would by itself be rather vague and open-ended, but the editors have taken steps to bring it into focus in a variety of ways, which they set out for the reader in an introductory chapter. They then divide the book into three sections: the first, comprising Chapters 2-6, contains case studies based directly on classroom practice, reporting on such topics as "The Contribution of a Course Assistant to English for Academic Purposes Speaking Classes" (Chapter 2), or "Teaching Spoken Language Skills through a Reading Comprehension Text" (Chapter 5). The next section, Chapters 7-9, revolves mainly around implications arising from the increasing prominence of English as an international language (EIL), and finally, Chapters 10-12 present inquiries into how to use native-speaker (NS) and learner interaction in the classroom as a means of learning. These broad divisions in the book also interpenetrate each other in numerous ways connected to the theme of interaction, through the recurrence of issues such as "intelligibility and comprehensibility," "communication management strategies," "interactional modifications and adjustments," and so on.

As the phrases above may indicate to the attentive reader, the common concern which lies at the heart of this book, and which for me lends its greatest interest in spite

of the occasionally dry effect of the language, is the process of communication itself, not only in its successful transactions, but also in its moments of confusion, in its potential breakdowns and temporary (or even out-and-out) derailments, as learners, teachers, visitors, and others, strive to make sense to each other. Almost every chapter in the book contains segments of authentic language (recorded and transcribed) which are then used as the raw data for often fascinating analyses of the shifts, strategies, and groping towards meaning of humans trying to communicate across language barriers. Thus in Chapter 6, for example, we are treated to an investigation of the "collaboration, accommodation and co-construction" used by two relatively fluent EFL teachers to comprehend each other's explanation of the subdivisions of TESOL itself (ESL and EFL); in Chapter 11 we analyze what happens when relatively low-level students set out to explain a technical process to a native-speaking outsider; and in Chapter 12 we see how students can become more conscious of their own communication strategies through learning to transcribe and analyze portions of their own discourse.

Explicit in the final chapter, and implicit in several others, is the suggestion that TESOL practitioners could be making more use of recording/transcription/analysis methods in their activities. This is a proposal which individual students, teachers, and researchers must weigh for themselves according to their own pedagogical preferences and instincts. Some will perhaps be more keen than others on the chores involved in recording and transcription, and a few may find themselves a little put off by the stuttering, influent appearance of authentic discourse on the page. Those who feel genuinely interested in this area, however, will likely place a high value on the set of case studies in this volume, as models of intriguing analysis presented at a high professional standard.

About the Reviewer

Paul Kinsella has a Ph.D. in English Literature from the University of British Columbia (UBC). He teaches academic speaking and listening at the English Language Institute, UBC, and writing for graduate students at the UBC Writing Centre.