

The Experience of Language Teaching

Rose M. Senior

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All language teachers will be delighted to recognise something of themselves in this book and will find it professionally stimulating and encouraging. Rose Senior wanted to discover, what makes a successful language teaching class from, the point of view of practising teachers. "Cohesion" emerges as the key word here. The book "draws attention to the many aspects of everyday teaching that are familiar to language teachers, but seldom described" and, reading it, one can sense how much the teachers enjoyed being asked to speak about their classes, the problems they face and how they overcome them. Wherever we are engaged in language teaching, we can recognise and respond to the problems described here. We can also identify strongly with the accounts of those magic moments when things go right and we realise that being a language teacher is one of the best jobs in the world.

Although those teachers interviewed for Rose Senior's book are almost all teachers of intensive courses of English as a second language to adults, working in either Australia or the UK, there are many parallels with the situation readers of the SLR know best – teaching foreign languages to young people in school or university in an English-speaking country. Indeed it can be useful to reflect on the differences and similarities between the two environments. Unusually for an academic book, this contains a narrative thread, allowing us to follow the development of language teachers, from the decision to go into language teaching (Chapter 2), through the developmental process (Chapters 3 and 4), Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the learners and how teachers acquire classroom management skills, while the need for flexibility and humour (something we are all very aware of) is discussed in Chapters 7 and 8. In Chapter 9 we see how teachers gradually learn to understand and make use of the group dynamics of their classes. The frustrations and rewards of language teaching in Chapter 10 are sure to resonate with all language teachers. Chapter 11 looks at the assumptions and motivations of successful language teachers before the presentation, in the final chapter, of a teacher-generated model proposing "a socio-pedagogic theory of classroom practice".

The book is the outcome of a meticulously executed grounded theory study, described in detail in the first chapter. As well as presenting a fascinating account of the professional life of language teachers, it is also an excellent introduction to this sometimes controversial research approach. Grounded theory is one of a number of well-established qualitative research traditions particularly suited to the social sciences, where researchers are attempting to understand social and cultural contexts. Rather than setting out to test an existing theory or hypothesis, it attempts to discover the theory implicit in the observed data. It requires a long process of systematic observation and meticulous analysis of data before a central core category (here, cohesion) and an explanatory theory, "grounded" in observation (Chapter 12), begin to emerge.

In the hands of Rose Senior, grounded theory is revealed as a complex and precise methodology, particularly well suited to the integration of "large

quantities of unstructured, qualitative data" into a coherent framework mapping the complex web of human interactions found in language classrooms. For this reason, and indeed for many others, this is a book of great interest to all research-minded language teachers, in whatever context they may be teaching.

When I met the author in Perth (that's Western Australia, not Scotland), she described her five interlinked studies over twelve years and explained the way a grounded theory study develops in an almost organic way. The qualitative data in the book come from teachers themselves, teachers who spoke frankly and honestly about their classroom experiences. Although there is a great contrast between the professional situation of teachers of English as a second language (ESL) to adults and most foreign language teachers (and readers of SLR), the differences in context may prompt some fruitful reflections: for example, on ESL training (frequently very brief) and on the much longer training required for teaching foreign languages in secondary schools or universities. As the book shows, many ESL teachers, although ill-prepared for the reality of the language classroom, do go on to become highly professional and successful teachers and ultimately the similarities between teaching English as a second language (TESL) and teaching foreign languages (TFL) are very striking.

All the teachers interviewed are engaged in communicative language teaching (CLT) and this was a topic which arose frequently in the interviews. For Rose, part of the motivation for the book was the need for an account, based on actual classroom practice, of what goes on in a communicative language classroom. She feels this is essential for non-native speaker teachers working in their own countries, and this is one of the audiences the book seeks to reach. Many of these teachers feel under pressure to practise "CLT" but, having never experienced it, find it difficult to introduce and manage in their classrooms. In Asian countries, for example, CLT differs so markedly from traditional language teaching methodology that both teachers and students may find it bewildering.

The definition of CLT which emerges from the interviews is sure to be of interest. Rose Senior has written extensively about CLT, notably in her regular column in the *English Teaching Professional* (www.etprofessional.com). A list of her publications can be found in her entry on the Curtin University web site (<http://humanities.curtin.edu.au/staff>) and her most recent article on this subject was 'Don't play communication for laughs' in the *Learning English* supplement of the *Guardian Weekly* (26 May – 1 June, p.4).

This is a book for everyone interested in how language teaching works, in what makes a successful language teacher and how language classes thrive. As a grounded theory study, it also offers a tool for qualitative research into language teaching and learning. I hope that, perhaps through Scottish CLT, it may inspire exciting new research into other aspects of our professional experience.

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