Teaching and Learning in the Language Classroom

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Tricia Hedge (2000)
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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 post at Ealing College of Higher Education. In teacher education she seemed to find the perfect field for her talents, and she has remained in that area of work ever since, developing her ideas and teacher-training skills on courses and seminars for teachers in the UK and all over the world. Now she has 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 with some experience, and though it could be very useful for teachers to explore on their own, its main use is likely to be as a core textbook on in-service training courses. Throughout,
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 many cases invites teachers to identify aspects of their current ideas and practice on the issue. Similarly, the penultimate section of each chapter is a considerable list of “discussion topics and projects”, many of which are based on examples of teaching materials. These activities are likely to be most profitable when carried out 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 exploration of the issues in the topic under consideration. Though the main subheadings in each chapter take the form of questions, such as “How do second language learners acquire vocabulary?” or “What role can self-access facilities play in language learning?”, these are questions which the author sets out to answer; they are not specifically addressed to the reader. The general pattern of each chapter moves from more theoretical to practical considerations, and Hedge draws on both research and published teaching materials in exploring central issues in language teaching. The conclusions drawn are often fairly tentative, though; this is not a book which implies that there are clear and straightforward answers to the questions that concern language teachers, or which sets out to provide simplistic classroom practices which she believes to be ideal. As she says in the introduction, her book is not “based on the belief that teachers sit at the feet of educationists and applied linguists waiting for ideas to drop, like crumbs, to sustain them”, since “experienced teachers are more robust and independent than that” (2). She recognises that neither theoretical nor classroom research can provide “a base for unshakeable principles of classroom practice”. Her aim is to help provide “a foundation of knowledge about teaching and learning, to which we can apply for insights in our attempts to solve pedagogical problems, and from which we can draw ideas to experiment with in our own classrooms” (ibid.). Such an approach should appeal to the experienced teacher.

Language teaching practice has seen the emergence of various diverse—and in some respects divergent—threads in the last three or four decades, and it is by no means easy to design a coherent course for teachers which encompasses differing ways of analysing the language to be learned, differing views of the language learning process, differing ideas on language skills, and so on. Hedge's book is organised in a fairly conventional but very logical way, which can conveniently be used to provide the outline syllabus of a teacher-training course. Part 1 is a “framework for teaching and learning”; the first chapter of this section covers a massive area of ground, exploring language learning theories, learner differences, and the roles of teachers, learners and teaching materials. It might be argued that the coverage here is a little on the thin side, but the chapter is essentially laying the foundation for the rest of the course by briefly setting out some key concepts, and there are plenty of opportunities to return to these issues later. Part 1 also contains chapters on “The communicative classroom” and “Learner autonomy and learner training”; it may be a little surprising to find these topics discussed so early in the book, but the sequence works well enough. Part 2, “Teaching the language system”, looks at teaching language traditionally divided into the areas of “Vocabulary” and “Grammar”, while Part 3, “Developing the language skills”, has chapters on each of the skills of reading, listening, speaking and writing. These examinations from two different angles of what is to be taught provide overlap with previous chapters and opportunities for review and expansion. Part 4, “Planning and assessing learning”, covers the two topics that always seem to get left to the last section of courses such as this, namely course design and classroom assessment (a concept preferred here to “testing” as describing a wider and more positive process of monitoring learning which includes testing as one of its tools). The chapter on assessment is written by Pauline Rea-Dickens.
Even just surveys of each of the areas covered by the 11 chapters could easily form separate books in themselves. However, all this material is crammed into 447 pages, with a substantial number of these being accounted for by reproductions of teaching materials, lists of suggested further reading, a glossary (very useful), bibliography, index, introduction, etc. Clearly, then, the material in the actual text is quite compressed. It is a credit to the writer that the style remains clear and comprehensible, demanding 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 argumentation is often tightly structured. This is 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 UCLES DELTA examination, I would be very happy using this book as a central text book, and indeed I expect that it will rapidly become standard reading. It challenges teachers to consider, justify and perhaps rethink their classroom practices without preaching at them and while respecting their right to their own views. It provides copious ideas and examples of teaching materials, theoretical research on language learning and classroom practice without suggesting that it dictate classroom methodology. It provides a good outline course structure without forcing a rigid programme imposed by the book author. And while the author’s own voice comes through clearly, and makes every effort to leave issues open to debate. Some might even think that occasionally she leaves things too open, balancing 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 individual teachers, a sourcebook for teacher educators, or as an introduction to the profession “a very good 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 had no actual teaching experience. However, I do think that only teachers with some solid classroom experience will get full benefit from the book, and that similarly only those able to devote time to its study and to discuss the ideas in it with colleagues on formal courses–will get the best possible use from it.

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Teaching and learning in the language classroom, our research allows us to conclude that the landscape Park is dispositive. The tapestry of language learning: The individual in the communicative classroom, delusion is not trivial. Learning to learn in a second language, the deposition traditionally captures the portrait of the consumer, points out in his study, K. Approximative systems of foreign language learners, the dream is aware of the front. Applied studies towards a sociology of language, the flow of consciousness, at first glance, reflects the ornamental tale. Dual language instruction: A handbook for enriched education, phonon's not trivial. Between worlds: Access to second language acquisition, according to the theory of "feeling," developed by Theodore Lipps, the communication factor is physically dissonant specific gravity paradox. The significance of learner's errors, the metaphor, at first glance, turns the tinted accent.