New publications ... Nuwe publikasies

Reviews

Wilga M. Rivers (ed.)

Interactive language teaching. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. (228 pp.)

A new publication edited by one of the world's leading authorities on second and foreign language teaching is an event worth noting, especially by language teachers who believe in adopting a communicative approach. For some time now, many teachers have felt the need for a book which departs from the realm of theory and moves into the world of actual classroom practice without over-emphasizing one particular aspect of a syllabus or one or two specific methods. Wilga M. Rivers has put together a series of articles by several distinguished language teachers who have experimented with various innovative techniques. The result is an eminently readable and useful publication.

Two facts are stressed in the preface to this book: (a) communication remains the central goal of language teaching and (b) "communication derives essentially from interaction". This explains the choice of title as all the articles support these two facts. The word "interactive" is derived from the Latin verb "agere", which means "to do", and the Latin preposition "inter", meaning "among" (p. 57). Thus interaction can be two-way, three-way or four-way, but never one-way (p. 9).

The book is divided into three sections. The first: What is interactive language teaching? contains two articles of a theoretical nature, one dealing with cognitive psychology and the interaction of perception and expression in oral and graphic communication; the second with the dynamics of interaction in the classroom. These opening chapters provide the rationale for and define the parameters of the methods described later. In chapter one Rivers defines interaction and discusses its implications for course design and classroom procedure, emphasizing the need for flexibility in the teacher's approach. She especially stresses listening as an interactive process which relies on semantic rather than syntactic cues and is fundamentally different from speaking. We are told what happens in an interactive classroom, what our aims should be and how to achieve them. Testing, too, should be interactive and "should replicate normal uses of language as much as is feasible" (p. 13).

Claire Kramsch discusses interactive discourse in small and large groups in chapter two. She commences with a description of the interaction continuum, which moves from instructional discourse to natural discourse. The teacher's attention is drawn to the importance of helping students "save face" when they use language incorrectly in group talk. This chapter also contains many practical ideas for large – and small – group work.

Section two is the longest: eight chapters by different writers covering most aspects of a language syllabus and entitled simply: Language in the classroom. The articles included are:

- Imaginative speaking and listening activities by Stephen Sadow. Many of the activities described (e.g. incomplete narratives, re-enactments of history, problem-solving) are not in themselves new, but are extremely well presented. The writer outlines a procedure for implementing these ideas and certainly stimulates thinking on the use of the imagination in the classroom.

- Motivating language learners through authentic materials by Bernice Melvin and David Stout. The stress on "authentic" balances the "imaginative" of the previous chapter. A comprehensive activity: "Discover a city" is used to describe types of authentic materials, where to find them and how to use them in both comprehension and production exercises.

- Interactive oral grammar exercises by Raymond Comeau convinces the teacher that it is possible to get away from "dry" rule-learning and traditional grammar exercises and instead teach grammar "through mutual participation, usually in small groups" (p. 57). Comeau outlines the five qualities this kind of exercise should have and illustrates its use in two ways: student-to-student interaction and instructor-to-student interaction. This chapter contains some exciting ideas which should appease those who feel that formal language study cannot be accommodated by a communicative approach.

- Interaction of reader and text by Anthony Paplia discusses the strategies readers use in deriving meaning from a written text, how to use the text to facilitate interaction as well as various interactive reading activities.

- Writing: an interactive experience by Gloria Russo attempts to demonstrate that "writing is not necessarily a solitary activity" (p. 83). Her discussion of various class writing, small-group, individual and community writing activities, convincingly supports this view.

- Poetry and song as effective language learning activities by Alan Maley confirms the long-held view of many teachers that poetry and song can be put to excellent use in comprehension, role-play and project work. Maley provides several stimulating ideas for the practical implementation of this approach.

- In Enhancing language learning through drama, Richard Via contends that drama fulfills "the experiential need" basic to language learning. He defines drama as "communication between people" (as opposed to theater which is "communication between people for the benefit of other people"). His discussion includes "the magic 'if' of the imagination", using the five senses, and improvisation, and concludes with play production as a means of language learning.

- Interactive Testing by Marlies Mueller is a chapter which urges the teacher to experiment with interactive testing techniques. Fully aware of the practical problems involved, she suggests various ways of conducting individual oral, group oral, aural and writing tests on an interactive basis.
Section three of this book contains five chapters, collectively entitled: The Wider World. These discuss learning to interact in different cultural styles, varying the medium in language teaching by using technological aids, and tapping the community as a resource for interactive activities. The book concludes with a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of CALL and its possible role in an interactive approach and a chapter on preparing students for professional language use.

A glance at the scope of this publication leaves one with a very favourable impression which is greatly enhanced by a closer reading. The writers, although mainly American, have much experience of organising teaching programmes in English for target groups from all over the world. Each article is self-contained and each concludes with a section: Let's act on it, which lists activities to help teachers incorporate the ideas expressed in the chapter into their own teaching. There are also reading lists of each topic covered.

It is seldom that a book which promises to help teachers ("what shall we do in class today?") really delivers the goods and lives up to expectations. This one does. It is a truly remarkable and valuable work, containing probably the most comprehensive and practical collection of articles on communicative language teaching yet published. I urge all second language teachers to read, enjoy and use it – it will undoubtedly increase the effectiveness of their teaching.

Cambridge University Press is to be congratulated on this and other similar publications, which according to catalogue, are soon to appear. If this book is anything to go by, they will be well worth waiting for.

J.J. Swartz