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Understanding Communication in Second Language Classrooms

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UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION IN SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS. *Karen E. Johnson.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Pp. xv + 187. \$42.95 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

This book is designed

to enable teachers to recognize how the patterns of communication are established and maintained in second language classrooms, the effect these patterns have on how second language students participate in classroom activities, and how their participation shapes the ways in which they use language for learning and their opportunities for second language acquisition. (p. 3)

The book has three parts. Part I, "A Framework for Understanding Communication in Second Language Classrooms," includes an overview of the framework (chapter 1), illustrations of how teachers use language to control the structure and content of classroom activities (chapter 2), an examination of how students' perceptions of classroom activities shape ways in which they participate in and learn from such activities (chapter 3), a review of how students' culturally acquired knowledge and use of language shape their ways of talking, acting, interacting, and learning (chapter 4), and a discussion of how the patterns of communication foster or constrain class participation (chapter 5). Part II, "Examining Patterns of Communication in Second Language Classrooms," deals with teacher-student and student-student interactions (chapters 6 and 7) and with community- and school-based issues that affect the classroom (chapter 8). Part III, "Promoting Communication in Second Language Classrooms," focuses on how teachers vary the patterns of classroom communication to maximize students' linguistic and interactional competencies (chapter 9) and on students' classroom communicative competence (chapter 10).

The book clearly demonstrates Johnson's deep understanding of American and British research in classroom communication and her remarkable ability to synthesize both. Although her framework is "adapted" from a model proposed by British educator Douglas Barnes in 1976, she strengthens her framework by drawing insights from classroom discourse analysis, teacher cognition, and second language acquisition. One of the commendable features (and there are many) of the book is the abundance of authentic data that tell us of personal histories of her students and student teachers. Using personal narratives effectively and judiciously, Johnson illustrates "how that which is hidden merges with and shapes that which is public" (p. 7). Equally commendable are her specific techniques for promoting student-student interaction (pp. 117-127) and her practical suggestions for expanding the patterns of classroom communication (pp. 145-159).

Given the stated objective of correlating classroom communication and language acquisition, the discussion on this matter is at best sketchy. Equally sketchy is the treatment of sociopolitical issues. One issue that has indeed been discussed at length is cultural variation and classroom interaction. The methodological rigor of research conducted so far on ethnicity and classroom interaction is suspect, and, at any rate, a common thread that runs through such research is "cultural stereotypes and pedagogic prescriptions that teachers themselves seem to bring to bear on classroom participation" (Kumaravadivelu, 1990, p. 48). In a 1987 study, Malcolm (whose 1979 and 1982 studies the author cites favorably) concluded that (a) "minority children's discourse patterns may vary vastly according to the routine employed by the teacher" (p. 39), (b) "as a complete explanation of minority deviations from classroom communicative norms, cultural differences are not sufficient" (p. 55), and (c) "where serious communication problems persist for minority groups in classrooms the reasons may well be affective rather than linguistic

or cultural" (p. 56). In light of such findings, the author appears too willing to assume a causal connection between cultural variation and classroom interaction. In fact, there have recently been calls for using cultural diversity as resource in language classes (Murray, 1992) and for treating learners as cultural informants (Kumaravadivelu, 1994). The author, however, deserves credit for advising teachers to know more about the native language and culture of their students.

Overall, this is yet another useful volume from the new Cambridge Language Education series, edited by Jack Richards. Johnson should be commended for providing an invaluable source on the dynamics of classroom communication and for writing in a style that is accessible not only to teacher educators but to practicing and prospective teachers as well.

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GRAMMAR: A STUDENT'S GUIDE. James R. Hurford. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Pp. 278. \$54.95 cloth.

This grammar reference book is both a dictionary of grammar terms and a textbook with supporting information and exercises for each entry. It is intended for students of a non-English language, students of linguistics, or language teachers but is not appropriate for nonnative speakers of English. The book provides a short but thorough explanation of each grammar term and even explains grammatical features not found (or hardly used) in English but that are important for understanding other languages (such as case or gender).

For each entry in the book, there are different subsections (explanation, examples, contrasts, relationships, and for interest). Some are weaker than others. The actual explanations of the grammar terms are often dense and make use of other grammatical terms that users may not know. These other terms can be cross-referenced, but for users who do not already have a fairly good grasp of grammar, this may prove to be frustrating and time-consuming. However, even if the explanation is unclear, the examples, contrasts, and relationships sections make up for this weakness and illustrate the grammar point in context. The exercises, however, are extremely weak. Most are either too simplistic and obvious or sometimes too obscure to be useful. For example, in the exercise for active voice, one is supposed to identify the sentence "Dustin fell down the stairs" (p. 8) as a nonactive sentence, but in the explanation for the term it says that it is "not usual to call clauses with intransitive verbs active, although some grammarians do so" (p. 7). What is the point of requiring one to identify the voice of this particular