

Classroom Discourse and the Space of Learning

F. Marton and A.B.M. Tsui [with P.P.M. Chik, P.Y. Ko, M. L. Lo, I.A. C. Mok, D.F.P. Ng, M.F. Pang, W.Y. Pong and U. Runesson]. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004. Pp. xii + 242. ISBN 0-805-400-7 (hbk): \$59.95. ISBN 0-805-400-5 (pbk): \$24.50.

The phrase 'learning pedagogy' may seem redundant. Yet, as the authors of this book note, it is descriptive of what they aim at: to formulate and demonstrate a theory of what it takes for a teacher to provide students with the necessary conditions to experience learning. From an avowedly narrow pedagogical perspective that is strictly concerned with teaching and learning to promote 'the growth of knowledge' (p. 227), a number of studies undertaken by researchers from Hong Kong and Sweden are presented and discussed from various angles. The teaching in two or more classes where *the intended object of learning* was the same is compared and contrasted in terms of differences observed in the way the object of learning was actually dealt with. The authors call this 'the enacted object of learning'. These differences are then examined 'from the point of view of the learning that was made possible for the students during each lesson', or *the lived object of learning*. Finally, the differences in the lesson are 'described in terms of those aspects of the object of learning that the teacher varied, and those aspects that the teacher kept invariant', thus fleshing out the overall theoretical assertion that 'the dimensions of the aspects that vary form the space of learning . . . which either constrains or makes learning possible' (p. 189). All of this is done didactically, as could be expected, and coherence with the overall theory is found in the manner of presentation across the chapters as well as in each chapter's development of its themes, with contextual variation affording the reader a space to learn the pedagogy proposed.

In the epilogue, the authors speak directly of their choice to concentrate on pedagogical rather than political, economic or social aspects involved in promoting the development of knowledge. They state that the progressivist (learner centred)/traditionalist (content-centred) divide has been 'a major obstacle to improving pedagogical practices', and go on to argue that both orientations must be considered together for the simple reason that 'there can be no learning without a learner, nor can there be any learning without something learned' (p. 228). It is important to note, however, that their choice throughout the book is for that which can be formulated as *objects* of learning, as they call them, of a fairly identifiable, testable sort. This limits what they can consider as 'education' or 'learning'. For example, out of five potential 'intended objects of learning' listed by the teachers in one of the studies (Chapter 8), two were chosen for implementation, one was ruled out because the pretest showed students already had a good grasp of those contents, and the two that were never mentioned again were truly educational (i.e. 'how to relate to other people, such as their classmates;' 'cultivate . . . an awareness of the environment and a positive attitude toward conservation', p. 204). Consistent with this stance, the word 'education' is used sparsely in *Classroom Discourse and the Space of Learning*.

The book is composed of a preface, eight chapters organised into four parts, and an epilogue. Part 1 ('On Learning and Language') and Part 4 ('On Improving Learning') are each composed of a single essay to introduce the theory and test it.

The two core sections concentrate on the one of the theory's two foci, namely 'On Learning' (Part 2) and 'On Language' (Part 4), featuring three reports each of classroom observation studies conducted by various researchers from Hong Kong and Sweden.

The opening chapter by Marton, Runesson and Tsui, 'The Space of Learning', introduces their 'specific theory of learning (i.e. the theory of variation – that learning to experience something in a certain way is contingent on the pattern of variation in the critical aspects of the object of learning)' (p. 211). With learning circumscribed to 'learning to see certain things in certain ways' (p. 23), this chapter is the authors' theoretical exposition, giving rise to the research questions and results examined in the subsequent chapters. With the aim of providing an understanding of 'what learners are expected to learn in particular situations, what they actually learn in those situations, and *why* they learn something in one situation but not in another', so that 'pedagogy becomes a reasonably rational set of human activities' (p. 3), the book proposes the thesis that 'the differences in what the students learn is to a large extent a function of what they can possibly learn', which 'is a space of learning constituted by that which is possible to discern' (p. 38).

The chapters 'on learning' (Part 2) form the backbone of the work. Chapter 2, 'Variation and the secret of the virtuoso' examines the difference between two enactments of one intended object of learning, one enactment involving 'some teaching that makes a certain learning possible' and another 'that fails to achieve this' (p. 43). Giving credit to a theory of learning by a Chinese math educator who 'developed his theory inductively by observing cases of good practice' (p. 56), Ko and Marton show that a set of *specific* patterns of variation carefully organised by the teacher so that the students could perceive and discern the critical aspects of a *specific* object of learning was a condition for making possible the learning of that object. In other words, 'variation with repetition' was key to good teaching.

In Chapter 3, 'Discernment and the Question, What can be Learned?', Runesson and Mok address the question in the title of their chapter by looking at critical features in the conduct of a math and a reading lesson so that students are able to attend to, hold in awareness and thus learn something. They show that what varied successively, what remained constant, and what varied simultaneously in each lesson was important for what turned out to be possible for the students to learn in each rendering of the teaching performed. In illuminating ways, they show that students learned one thing in one lesson and other things in the other lesson on the same *specific* object.

In Chapter 4, 'Simultaneity and the Enacted Object of Learning', Chik and Lo tackle the complex task of planning and conducting simultaneous variation of critical aspects of the object of learning during a lesson. They insist on the crucial role of the structure of the presentation being evident for the learners, especially as far as purpose and sequencing are concerned. Not surprisingly, they find out, for example, that the students in Chinese class who were led to discern a *specific* set of vocabulary items as related entities in terms of the attributes of the words in the set outperformed their counterparts who attended a lesson where the items in the set were presented as largely unrelated. Even more telling is the second contrast in the chapter, which compares English as a second language students from a pair of primary Grade 1 groups who experienced different enacted objects

of learning having to do once more with vocabulary items. Whereas both groups managed to learn the items taught, the students who experienced a rendering of the lesson in which parts and wholes and different aspects of the items were shown to vary in careful simultaneity did better in posttests, and not only in quantitative terms, but also qualitatively. As evidenced in a fill-in-the-blanks dialogue exercise in the posttest, more than simply producing the expected responses for each sentence, these students made sure the overall result was a sensible dialogue.

All three papers in Part 4 have Amy Tsui as an author discussing the sphere of language in the theory. *Language* here encompasses both the linguistic codes – with great emphasis on the semantics of linguistic objects of learning and on the linguistic media of instruction – and also the use of language. ‘*Discourse* is therefore a process in which meanings are negotiated and disambiguated, as well as a process in which common grounds are established and widened’ (p. 167). While this view of language use works in tandem with the overall emphasis on ‘*specific objects*’ throughout the book, it neglects a number of aspects of the organisation of language use by people in social interaction for doing things rather than for producing unequivocal meanings (with important consequences, both analytic and theoretical, which are beyond the scope of this review).

Thus, Chapter 5 ‘Questions and the Space of Learning’ (Tsui, Marton, Mok and Ng) investigates the role of questions posed and evaluated by the teachers in creating the space of learning. Open vs. close type questions are said to either ‘open up the space of learning by encouraging students to explore possible answers and to formulate their own answers, or reduce the space of learning by confining students to only a restricted number of possibilities and even encouraging them to engage in guesswork’ (p. 130). In Chapter 6, ‘The Semantic Enrichment of the Space of Learning’, Tsui examines contextual variation, which is a key element in the overall theory expounded in the book, in the handling by different teachers of the stages of activities in a lesson. In Chapter 7, ‘The Shared Space of Learning’, she shows how the space of learning, which is ‘characterised by classroom interaction in the light of a specific object of learning’ (p. 184), again not surprisingly, ‘is a shared space jointly constituted by the teacher and the learners’ (p. 185), always contingent on the establishment and maintenance of common ground.

Chapter 8, ‘Toward a Pedagogy of Learning’ (Lo, Marton, Pang and Pong), reports on interventions for the improvement of learning. After all, ‘if we really know what is critical in order for learning to take place, should we not try to make use of our insights to help shape the lessons for better learning?’ (p. 189), the authors ask confidently. They tested the theory by comparing groups taught by teachers who prepared their lessons together against groups taught by teachers who prepared lessons together only after they were exposed to the authors’ theory of learning pedagogy, with evident advantages for the latter.

Overall, the theory presented in the book amounts to a rather sensible pedagogy of learning that could well serve as a useful text in teacher-training courses. It shows what works in preparing and presenting a lesson so that students will be given the chance to see things differently from the way they saw them before being taught that lesson. It also serves to raise one’s awareness about what makes good teaching practice, and perhaps to guide novices and practitioners toward better, or more technically professional, practices.

In fact, while *Classroom Discourse and the Space of Learning* seems to reflect an original articulation of a number of ideas stemming from the close collaboration of two research teams, one in Hong Kong and the other in Sweden, various passages echo the ideas of more widely known authors such as Paulo Freire or Vygotsky, although neither of these appears in the reference list. As far as language and context are concerned, a great deal is made of the notion of discernment, which of necessity deals with issues of cognitive attention and context. Given the use of the concept of *frame* (p. 10), it is noteworthy that the work of Erving Goffman is never mentioned in the book. The same goes for the absence of any discussion regarding the concept of *common ground* by psycholinguists such as Clark (e.g. 1996). The epilogue is also replete with statements pointing out so-called 'gaps in the literature' which unfortunately seem to evidence that the authors have seriously overlooked many relevant works. (The same could be said about the section on language and culture and the linguistic relativity hypothesis in Chapter 1, which ignores recent discussion of the relevant issues; e.g. Gumperz & Levinson, 1996; Pinker, 1994.) For example, they claim not to have heard 'discussions about the effect of language on the learning of mathematical concepts, scientific concepts, and historical concepts', and conclude that 'the relationship between language and learning has been narrowly confirmed to language learning' (p. 230). This clearly neglects much of what appears in this journal, not to mention a good portion of what gets done in applied linguistics throughout the world.

As the various authors insist on claiming they have identified and demonstrated a number of facts that relate to concepts and phenomena that others have discussed with great repercussion before them, the reader may wonder why major relevant thinkers are not discussed in the text. In contrast, reference is often made to less widely available works in either Chinese (5) or Swedish (3), books from the *Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis* (7), theses and dissertations presented at the University of Hong Kong (5), unpublished manuscripts (4), and even papers presented at conferences (4) (totalling 28 entries in a list of 87), many times as the source of 'background' (p. 157) or 'detailed information and discussions' (p. 91) on what is being reported. This bi-local flavour contrasts rather sharply with the overall universality of the theoretical claims made about learning.

The authors do stress they are concentrating on specific objects of learning as capabilities rather than discrete decontextualised pieces of information. However, since hardly any concern with developing a capability for thoughtful and responsible participation in political, economic, social and cultural life is seen to guide the authors' sense of what learning and pedagogy are all about, it must be pointed out that a lot that would fall under the rubric of education is apparently left out of the space of learning as defined in this book. In this sense as well, pedagogy of learning is a telling turn of phrase to describe the book's professed scope of interest – both for what it chooses to focus on and for what it leaves for discussion.

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The Language Revolution

David Crystal. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2004. Pp viii + 142. ISBN 0-7456-3313-7 (pbk): £12.99. ISBN 0-7456-3312-9 (hbk): £45.00.

In recent years, issues of language death and maintenance, language change, and the position of English as a global language have received increasing attention in both the popular press and in academic circles. Crystal's new book, *The Language Revolution*, reviews these three issues, providing a non-specialised audience with a readable introduction to some of the most pressing concerns in the field of applied linguistics today.

The first three chapters, as Crystal admits, 'will generate a strong sense of déjà vu' amongst those who have read three of his earlier books, *English as a Global Language*, *Language Death* and *Language and the Internet* (p. vii). Chapter One, for example, is essentially a condensed version of *English as a Global Language*, highlighting some of the main themes that appeared in that (2003) book. In this chapter, Crystal presents an overview of some of the main factors that have led to English's current status as a global lingua franca, including politics, economics, the media and education. Crystal argues that in addition to these 'centripetal' factors – which create a need for mutual comprehensibility and thus promote the spread of a standard variety of English – there are also 'centrifugal' factors at work, such as the need to express regional and national identity. The latter forces, he maintains, have led to the development of 'New Englishes', such as Singaporean English and Nigerian English, which are becoming increasingly unique in their patterns of pronunciation and vocabulary use. The chapter ends with a prediction that we may see 'the gradual emergence of a tri-English world', one in which the home family dialect, the national standard, and as-as-of-yet unrealised International Standard English coexist (p. 38).

Likewise, Chapter Two draws heavily upon Crystal's (2000) book *Language Death* in its discussion of the future of languages. After opening the chapter with a brief discussion of loan words, Crystal then moves to his main theme: that the imminent death of half of the world's languages is a phenomenon that must be brought to the public's attention. He notes that more than half of the world's 6000 languages are moribund, with 4% of the world's population speaking 96% of its languages. Crystal discusses some of the factors that have led to language death, including the expansion of languages such as English, Spanish, Arabic and Russian, as well as genocide, natural disasters and economic/political factors. In a brief but cogent argument, Crystal notes that every time a language disappears, the cultural diversity that defines us as a species is threatened. Finally, commenting on the fact that more than a third of the world's languages remain undocumented, Crystal closes the chapter