

Introducing Classroom Interaction

Amy Tsui
Penguin 1995
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Reviewed by Marilyn Lewis, English Department, University of Auckland.

Of all the recent books on classroom language, this paperback in the Penguin *Introducing* series must be one of the most concise and the most accessible to beginners, building as it does on the author's interest in conversational analysis (*English Conversation* 1994, Oxford University Press). Tsui's latest book follows a growing practice by language teacher educators of providing a forum for their students' work. In this case, teachers on her courses have provided some of the data which illustrates the theory, including extracts from their journals and tape-recordings from their classrooms.

The theoretical base to the book does not claim to be new. The headings (classroom interaction and language learning, teacher talk, input and interaction, student talk and classroom observation) are familiar from the work of Allwright and Bailey, Chaudron, Van Lier and others whose work on classroom language and classroom observation are well read in teacher education programs. What is new is the brevity, and yet the thoroughness, with which Tsui interweaves clear explanations, thoughtful questions and clearly labelled samples in straightforward language.

In many books that include classroom samples, one is left to guess at the focus of the lessons and the level of the class. Here, at least some of the quotations are identified ("a fourth year primary class reading comprehension lesson"). Others are referred to simply as "ESL lessons", from which we infer, perhaps incorrectly, that the lesson content does not relate to the rest of the school curriculum. It would have been helpful to have an indication at the start of each quotation of whether it was in the original or translated form; I was surprised at the complexity of the sentence structure used by a child in the first year of school until discovering at the end that it was a translation.

Because the author has taken samples that illustrate more than the main point she is making, readers have refreshingly honest glimpses into wider aspects of

classroom learning, such as how much of the lesson time is not on the track planned by the teacher. For instance, in the first chapter (classroom interaction and language learning), there is a dialogue where the teacher looks almost ready to give in to a child's request to postpone the handing in of a grammar exercise; in the end she decides they have been lazy and she has her own schedule to get through. "I'm sorry, you have to do it, otherwise I won't be able to finish marking your books to give you back before the holidays." Readers will find other familiar moments in the students' constant interruptions about homework.

Teachers or teachers in training will be able to make connections throughout the book between their own experiences and the points Tsui is making. In fact, reading it is like holding up a mirror to one's own teaching. For example, there is the badly worded or the pointless question that students don't answer because they can't see why the teacher is asking it, as in the seven-part exchange following the question, "Who is sitting in the middle of the classroom?". The teacher finally abandoned it because the class didn't realise they were meant to answer "nobody".

The book is based on lectures given by Tsui at the University of Hong Kong. Unlike some of the teachers she quotes, her questions are always to the point; such as asking the reader to predict what might happen next following a sample dialogue. There are none of those rhetorical questions which the perceptive reader immediately recognises as a statement in disguise. Not every question has a 'right' answer. "Do you think the student's errors ought to be corrected in each case?" could lead to various interpretations. The explanation that follows deals with the difference between linguistically and semantically incorrect statements, and with the need to judge whether the language will help or hinder communication.

Teacher educators wanting fresh ideas for their assignments will find projects following three of the chapters. As well as the traditional transcribing of a

lesson segment, there is the more focused suggestion for examining student talk by splitting a class in half and having them complete the same task in two different ways. Then the recording is analysed according to four dimensions listed.

The explanations of theory are broken into small, easy to follow chunks, and most terms likely to be new to the reader are explained in the main text. The few that Tsui does not consider she has covered adequately are highlighted in bold print and listed in the short glossary, where I met the term 'communication apprehension' for the first time. It turned out, not surprisingly, to be a succinct way of describing a feeling that people can have during social situations, interviews and meetings. (Why not in classrooms too?)

By the end of each chapter when readers come to the summary of points made, they are likely to have learned the points thoroughly because of the book's format. It could be a good starting point for all language teachers on courses, and would be particularly helpful for second language readers, since the language of explanation is so straightforward, without in any way watering down the topic. One final thought: if more of us took the trouble to polish up our lecture notes and combine them with original data, how many more aspects of second language learning and teaching could be available to wider audiences?

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