Understanding the Language Classroom[1]
Edited by Simon Gieve and Inés K. Miller (2006)
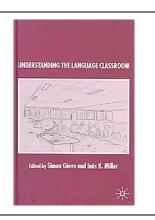**New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan**
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Reviewed by John I. Liontas
State University of New York at Fredonia

INTRODUCTION

Once in a while you come across an edited volume that is hard to put down. *Understanding the Language Classroom* (edited by Simon Gieve and Inés K. Miller) is one such rare volume. I know, for I read the entire work on my flight to the 40th Annual TESOL Convention and Exhibit in Tampa, FL this past March 2006. Just as last year's TESOL 2006 Convention Planning Team dared us to lead our students in 2006 and beyond with the theme "Daring to Lead," in like manner this volume dares us to understand the language classroom no matter the students' age, the classroom level, or the country where we teach.

From the Americas to the United Kingdom to New Zealand, this 12-chapter volume, covering some 275 pages, touches upon a host of issues of language classroom life that anyone interested in "language classroom research" would be hard pressed to ignore. Once you begin reading, you will soon find yourself wanting to read evermore, for the views expressed in this volume are as diverse as the sixteen individuals that contributed to the wealth of information contained in this well-crafted work (see *Notes on the Contributors*, pp. xix-xxii).

Beginning with Kathleen M. Bailey's *Foreword* (xi-xvi), the reader is immediately immersed in the diversity of views surrounding language classroom research. Even those familiar with the changes taking place in applied linguistics over the last twenty-five years will find in Bailey's foreword a welcome summary that goes beyond mere linguistic historiography from the 1970s to today. In the first paragraph the reader is informed that "the authors and editors have all been influenced by Dick Allwright's thinking," who "has spent his entire professional life trying to understand (and help others to understand) life in language classrooms" (p. xi). The next nine paragraphs that follow paint in broad strokes answers to the main question posed, *"What is language classroom research?"* and more importantly, succinctly capture the evolving nature of

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the various traditions of classroom research (from psychometric traditions to critical classroom discourse analysis) and the expanding role of the teacher (from teachers as *subjects* to teachers as *producers* of research). What appears to be at first a simple, straightforward notion of classroom processes (i.e., understanding what happens when learners and teachers come together inside the classroom), soon reveals itself to be a far more complex issue than first imagined. What happens *inside* the classroom is as important as what happens *outside* and the factors that influence language learning and language teaching. Understanding this *inside-outside* symbiotic relationship with all its human and institutional factors becomes the central focus that all contributors in this volume aspire to capture, define, explain and, ultimately, understand. The 42-references list at the end of the Foreword is as good a list as I have ever seen on the subject. In particular, graduate students working on 'language classroom research' (by whatever name) will appreciate such list spanning twenty-six years of research (1980-2006).

SUMMARY

The *Introduction* (pp. 1-10) by Simon Gieve and Inés K. Miller (the two editors of this volume) is yet another must read section not only because it introduces the organization and central themes of the volume but, more importantly, because it sets the tone for the 11 individual chapters that respond to Dick Allwright's *Six Promising Directions in Applied Linguistics* (Chapter 1). Readers unfamiliar with Allwright's academic work will find much needed background information in the first three pages of the introduction. The remaining seven pages reveal the organization of the volume in two main areas of interest: Chapters 2-8, what goes on inside the language classrooms, and Chapters 9-12, language teacher education and development (although this theme-based organization is not at all apparent in the Contents section, vii-viii).

Those new to the profession may at first be shocked to find out that learners, according to Allwright, "don't simply learn what teachers teach, but that learning arises out of the *learning opportunities* that emerge through interaction in the classroom" (p. 1; emphasis in the original). Contrary to teaching practices put forth by many teacher education programs espousing a 'scientific' approach to language teaching and learning (at least in the United States of America), Allwright dares the reader to see beyond the smokescreens of methodological solutions to teaching and language learning, beyond the search for the ideal conditions for language learning and the ideal behaviors for language teachers. In short: beyond the prescribed 'technologisation of education.' Instead, Allwright proposes a set of six interwoven directions for applied linguistics, all interpretations of which are guided by his own sense of what is "promising" in the field since the 1950's. The six directions that Allwright discusses in Chapter 1 are: 1. *From prescription to description to understanding*, 2. *From simplicity to complexity*, 3. *From commonality to idiosyncrasy*, 4. *From precision to scattergun*, 5. *From teaching and learning as "work" to teaching and learning as "life,"* and 6. *From academics to practitioners as the knowledge-makers in the field.* It is to these six "promising directions" that the eleven other contributors respond. Specifically:

Chapter 2 (Simon Gieve & Inés K. Miller), "What do we mean by 'quality of classroom life'?" The authors, responding to Allwright's direction 5 and based on his principles of Exploratory Practice, argue for the notion of "classroom awareness," which they define as understanding

arising from the process of teachers and learners working together toward joint understanding that informs the quality of life in the classroom (QoCRL).

Chapter 3 (Adrian Holliday), "What happens between people: Who we are and what we do." Holliday, responding to Allwright's first four directions, finds that the central issue in TESOL today is the concept of *native-speakerism*, an aspect of *culturism*, which features a cultural division marked by the distinction between native and non-native speakers. He defines *native-speakerism* as the "chauvinistic belief that 'native speakers' represent a 'Western culture' from which spring the ideals both of the language and of language teaching methodology" (p. 49). The chapter concludes with eleven strategies (pp. 59-60) that summarize what can or cannot be done about native-speakerism in TESOL.

Chapter 4 (Tony Wright), "Managing classroom life." As suggested by the chapter title, this section focuses on the complexity of classroom life and in particular the life *of* and *in* the classroom, guided by the concern for the *quality* of that life (i.e., how to maximize the quality of classroom life that is contextualized by institutional forces, sociocultural expectations and life outside). Wright then discusses five elements of classroom management which, when utilized with care and attention to detail, can maximize the quality of classroom life: time, space, affective engagement, social participation and material, and cognitive resources.

Chapter 5 (Devon Woods), "Who does what in the 'management of language learning'? Planning and the social construction of the 'motivation to notice'." Responding to Allwright's directions 1, 2, 3, 5 and emphasizing the constructivist nature of the classroom language learning processes, Woods, as his chapter title suggest, examines critically the question *'Who does what in the management of language learning?* which, in turn, is quickly morphed into a more appropriate question of '*how* is who does what decided?' In answering this question, Woods first explains 'what is the management of language learning' (i.e., what it entails in terms of planning actions and evaluating events) and how participant roles over 'whose job it is to do what' are negotiated in the process of classroom language teaching and learning. He then looks at decision-making and relationships between planning by the teacher and the learner, features of the negotiations of planning between the two. Woods finally examines the social construction of the types and levels of motivation to notice—the concept of attending, noticing, focusing on form—and the negotiation of attention to learner errors in an effort to develop a "deeper situated reflective understanding" (p. 111) of the complexity and idiosyncrasy inherent in seeking answers to the original question 'who does what in the management of language learning.'

Chapter 6 (Hywel Coleman), "Darwin and the large class." Responding to Allwright's direction 3 (and not 2 as stated in the Introduction section, p. 115), Coleman first takes issue with the still elusive technical solutions offered at understanding and managing the phenomenon of the 'large class' and using a Darwinian metaphor—the theory of natural selection—to reject the deficit model of teaching. He then attempts to explain why "each individual classroom event represents the best available 'local adaptation' for the environmental niche in which it occurs" (p. 115). Thereafter, Coleman uses two case studies (pp. 123-129) as examples of what he terms the 'achievement of local adaptation in classroom events' regardless of context (also represented graphically in Figure 6.1, p. 130). The 'eight categories of pressure'—from 'system demands' to 'learners' competence, expectations, experiences, and learning styles—represent not only the

current 'best fit' available in that context but, more importantly, help us understand that the achievement of local adaptations to changing environments is indeed a multifaceted 'dynamic process' regardless of the occurrence of gradual mutations taking place in classroom events (p. 132).

Chapter 7 (Ming-i Lydia Tseng & Roz Ivanič), "Recognizing complexity in adult literacy research and practice." Responding to Allwright's directions 1-6, the authors develop a conceptual framework for adult literacy education that promotes understanding of learning in ELT classrooms rather than mere prescriptions for or descriptions of teaching-learning events. Guided by the desire to evaluate the *complexity* of what is happening in a learning-teaching event, the authors maintain that learning (as a life-long process) is not the total sum of what is taught in class. Endorsing Alwright's proposal of 'Exploratory Practice,' the authors develop a comprehensive model of factors affecting learning-teaching events (i.e., participants' beliefs, intentions, and resources; learning and teaching resources; the political and institutional context; and sociocultural factors and issues of inequality). This is followed by the nature of learning-teaching events, the creation of learning opportunities and, finally, the different types of learning outcomes (i.e., learning about content, learning, language, social relations and identities, and the wider benefits of learning) resulting from the relationship between 'teaching' and 'learning-as-process.'

Chapter 8 (Elaine E. Tarone), "Language lessons: A complex, local co-production of all participants." Using data from descriptive case studies of child language learners in French, Spanish, and English immersion classrooms plus findings from studies of the second language learning process of young adults in college-level language classrooms, Tarone argues against prescriptive, simplistic solutions on 'how to teach foreign language' that are universally applied to all language learning and teaching situations and classrooms as all language lessons are locally negotiated. Each language classroom is representing a specialized kind of speech community with shared norms of language behaviors, all of which are the result of a complex and idiosyncratic sociolinguistic dynamic, affecting second language acquisition processes and use between teachers and learners and among learners, peers, and interlocutors in and outside the classroom. Tarone concludes the chapter with the assertion that more descriptive case studies should be done to help both researchers and teachers to "understand the complex nature of language classrooms, and some of the ways in which they may function" (p. 173).

Chapter 9 (John F. Fanselow & Roger Barnard), "Take 1, Take 2, Take 3: A suggested three-stage approach to exploratory practice." Responding to Allwright's directions 1, 2, and 6, the authors propose, as suggested in their chapter's title, their interpretation of what constitutes 'Exploratory Practice.' Fundamentally, the authors suggest the creation of multiple perspectives resulting from a three-stage approach: *Take 1, recreating interaction* (selecting and preparing transcripts highlighting a particular classroom problem or issue), *Take 2, reflection on action* (interpretation of transcript from an '-emic' and '-etic' perspective), and *Take 3, reconstruction for action* (generation of alternative possibilities for classroom practice following a comparison of the three perspectives of stage two). Their ultimate goal, however, remains not to prescribe their approach for everyday teaching, but to use the three-stage approach as an exploratory tool to systematically investigate and understand multiple interpretations of teaching practice.

Chapter 10 (Michael P. Breen), "Collegial development in ELT: The interface between global processes and local understandings." In this chapter, Breen first identifies four key aspects of the work of English language teaching practitioners that are now under challenge: (1) teacher knowledge (i.e., what it is that teachers are supposed to know), (2) changing the ways in which teachers are expected to teach (i.e., how language may be best taught), (3) a preoccupation with the concept of 'performativity' (i.e., how we do things and how well we do them), and (4) insecurity in working conditions and the requirement to 'keep moving' to achieve career mobility. Having addressed these four interrelated challenges of change and destabilization to the individual and professional community identity of English teachers, he then asks "how processes for professional development may enable teachers to adopt and engage strategies to deal with such circumstances in a personally developmental way" (p. 208). In what follows, Breen argues against overt reliance on the authenticity of local vernacular pedagogies as a way to face the challenges of recontextualization of knowledge. He suggests "professionalism across ELT is unavoidably hybrid" (p. 210). In turn, reflective practice, action research, and Allwright's proposal for Exploratory Practice are briefly evaluated before deducing from these three approaches the seven desirable features of future teacher development programs which, while dealing with global issues that impact upon teacher's work, are, nevertheless, grounded in localized communities of practice. Breen identifies these as "collegial development within language teaching" (p. 217). The first four features address the teacher's position as an active participant in development (i.e., as integrated individuals, as members of communities, as cultural workers, and as individuals responsible for their own development) whereas the remaining three features address the requirements for teacher development (i.e., collegiality, discursiveness, and evolutionary change). For Breen, these seven interrelated features combined, form the nucleus of future language teacher development programs.

Chapter 11 (Maria Antonieta Alba Celani), "Language teacher educators in search of 'locally helpful understandings.'" Guided by Allwright's (2006) 'six promising directions,' Celani is interested in helping Brazilian teachers of English to develop as critical professionals, to become aware of and analyze their practices, and to construct their social identity in an effort to better understand how identity awareness affects discursive practices and social relations. In short, to become "not only agents of change in their professional context, but also knowledge-makers in the field" (p. 228). She then extends Allwright's 'directions' to the world of teacher education and discusses the main challenges encountered in the context of conceptualizing and managing a wide-scale in-service English teacher education program in São Paulo, Brazil: (1) Managing social interaction in a multifarious context; (2) Meeting the needs of teacher-students; and (3) Quality in classroom action. Celani concludes the chapter with a final reflection asserting the need for all participants to act in concert "as knowledge-makers, as practitioners who seek for understanding of their own respective actions, in their own particular circumstances" (p. 234).

Chapter 12 (Donald Freeman), "Teaching and learning in 'The age of reform': The problem of the verb." In this chapter, the final in this volume, Freeman presents a conceptual discussion, the core premise of which is the nature of teaching and its complexity, and how teaching relates to classroom language learning in what he calls "the age of reform" (p. 240). He argues that there are three core misunderstandings about the relationship between teaching and learning. The first problem is that of *individualism* (i.e., viewing teaching and learning as a matter of 'individuals' rather than 'multiple communities'). The second problem is that of *immediacy* (i.e., thinking

about the social practice of the classroom only in the present, in the here-and-now, while ignoring past historical processes). The final problem is that of *causality* (i.e., the behavior of the individual teacher 'causes' individual students to learn). Having countered these problematic notions via the framework of social practices, Freeman contends that, given the current demands of social needs and national policies in the 'age of reform,' what is needed most is a new kind of understanding of the relationship between teaching and learning—a kind of understanding that approaches the problem of the verb within, rather than away from, the complexity and interdependence of the teaching-learning relationship. In short, how we complete the statement, *What teachers know and do——what students know and do,* profoundly impacts the 'quality of life' in the language classroom.

EVALUATION

Understanding the Language Classroom is by no means an easy volume to 'understand' even for trained and experienced language professionals. This 12-chapter volume is a collection that is hard to ignore and, more importantly, hard to 'understand' in reading it cover to cover in one sitting. This is not because the individual chapters in themselves are hard to grasp. Far from it! Ranging in length from 6 pages (low end) to 24 pages (high end), each chapter in its own right twists and turns our very own understanding of classroom language learning and teaching. What appears to be at first a straightforward issue, ends up being far more complex than first imagined. If 'learners do not simply learn what teachers teach' (Chapter 1), what does that say about all the other volumes, books, and conference proceedings focusing on the methodological solutions to teaching and learning language? What does that say about teacher education in general? How do we define what we mean by 'quality of classroom life' (Chapter 2), who we are and what we do (Chapter 3)? Is classroom life only what teachers and learners make it or is it rather, in the words of Tony Wright, "what they make *of* it, and what it makes them" (p. 64) (Chapter 4)? Who decides who does what in the 'management of language learning' (Chapter 5) and how do we best ascertain the complexity in adult literacy (Chapter 7)? Does it even make sense to offer centralized prescriptions on 'how to teach foreign languages' (Chapter 8), provided of course that we know how to achieve this elusive end? Should we instead, explore multiple perspectives and interpretations of teaching practice and take comfort in knowing that we are all 'learners' and 'knowledge-makers' (Chapter 9)? Is there indeed an interface between global processes and local understandings (Chapter 10)? If we agree that there is, how do we help teachers to develop as critical professionals? Should we expect them to become only 'agents of change,' 'knowledge-makers,' or both (Chapter 11)? Is language teaching and learning in the 'age of reform' as "multi-faceted, messy and even chaotic" (p. 239) as Freeman suggests (Chapter 12)? Must we rethink and reshape our conceptions of classroom as 'activity systems' and does each classroom event in the real world—regardless of context—represent the "best available 'local adaptation for the environmental niche in which it occurs" (p. 115) no matter what the actual class size (Chapter 6)?

The above represent but a small sample of questions this volume poses, questions which, I submit, are not easy to answer. To state otherwise is to minimize the 'inherent complexity' of language classrooms, to disregard their 'situatedness,' to understand the 'idiosyncrasy' of classroom life without understanding the relationship between classroom life and teachers' and

students' lives. Collectively, however, they force the reader to question and rethink his understanding of the puzzle called the 'language classroom,' to view teacher education inside and outside classrooms from a new angle of practitioner-based exploration, to grapple with the factors that affect the quality of life in the language classroom, to question technocratic solutions promising to fully capture the negotiating roles between teachers and learners and the intertwined relationship between the local understandings and the global processes. In doing so, we may find ourselves pursuing promising new ideas and directions in applied linguistics. In particular, students enrolled in university Masters and Doctoral programs may well find in this volume a much needed intellectual stimulation to engage in Exploratory Practice as a form of practitioner research, research that offers fresh opportunities for them and their students to engage in discursive practices to achieve, both individually and collectively, a heightened level of understanding of their classroom lives. One thing is certain: such collaborative discursive practices will no doubt contribute toward an improved quality of classroom life, incorporating and integrating in the process the many understandings of teacher-student beliefs, roles, and responsibilities about classroom language development and management. This, in turn, may necessitate a new understanding of how the relationship among teacher knowledge, professional learning, and classroom teaching must be construed in the future if the complexity and fluidity of classroom life—a central thematic focus in all 12 contributions—is to shed more light on the complexity of the learning-teaching process in general and language teacher education in particular (see also Fanselow, 1987; Freeman, 1991; Larsen-Freeman, 1998, 2000; Prabhu, 1990).

The questions posed, the issues addressed, and the answers, arguments, and insights offered in this well-crafted volume all but scratch the surface of this moving target. *Understanding the Language Classroom* is a floating iceberg. Only ten percent is amenable to direct observation. The remaining ninety percent is hidden beneath the surface. The more you scratch, the more discoveries you make. With each chapter I read, I was forced to rethink my own assumptions, biases, and beliefs about teaching and learning, about my professional training, and about the role I play inside and outside my classroom. One cannot help but feel a bit perplexed at the end. Questioning your own understanding is not an easy task or one that should be taken lightly. Perhaps this is the volume's greatest strength, forcing its readers to problematize "prescription, efficiency and technical solutions as orientations to classroom language learning" (back cover). Its very nature calls into question a great many things we take for granted in our language profession and, as such, this volume should offer both language practitioners and (under)graduate students ammunition for some long-lasting heated debates. Therein lies its strength. Therein lies the understanding.

In short, *Understanding the Language Classroom* is a well-organized, well-edited work that should prove most valuable for many discussions to come. As such, it is an important addition to anyone's list of edited volumes on second languages and the complexity of learning, and I recommend it most highly both as a reference volume and as a source from which fruitful areas for future research and practice may spring.

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John I. Liontas is Associate Professor of TESOL and Coordinator of the TESOL Education Program K-12 at State University of New York at Fredonia, performing research and development in second language teaching methodology, figurative competence, pragmatics, curriculum and program design, and multimedia-based learning. He has delivered several keynote addresses and conducted over 170 presentations, lectures, and workshops on language teaching and learning at local, state, regional, national, and international conferences in the United States and abroad and has published textbooks and articles in the area of curriculum design and development, on writing and reading, on idiomaticity, on technology-based language instruction, and on interactive games and game approaches.

E-mail: Liontas@fredonia.edu