BOOK REVIEW

THE CLASSROOM AND THE LANGUAGE LEARNER. Leo van Lier. Harlow: Longman, 1988. 226 pp. ¥2,340.

Teachers are always on the lookout for new ideas that will work in their particular classrooms. For many hard-pressed teachers with very little time to keep up to date with the constant flow of developments in the field, the exchange of ideas is largely anecdotal, occurring in conversations with colleagues at odd moments in the staff room. These discussions, which are typically concerned with "what works" in a lesson or part of a lesson are not to be disparaged. They constitute one of the few means of professional development available to teachers once their training has finished.

This informal sharing of ideas is, arguably, classroom research, in that conclusions about teaching and learning are drawn from happenings observed in class time. But the conclusions arrived at in such discussions are vulnerable to two different kinds of objection.

The first objection concerns the issue of scope. Teachers understandably prefer ready-to-use techniques and materials that contribute to an enjoyable and purposeful *lesson* and are concerned rather less with their impact on the long-term aims of a *course*. The criteria by which we gauge the effectiveness of new ideas (and old) need to be widened to integrate short-term and long-term objectives.

The second kind of objection stems from the familiar distrust of personal intuition as a means of describing what is happening in the classroom. What one teacher or student sees as success, after all, is open to different interpretations by others.

The call to replace suspect intuitions with more valid means of gathering information is, of course, a call to make descriptions of what goes on in a classroom more *objective*. Leo van Lier's central purpose in *The Classroom and the Language Learner* is to establish ways in which this objectivity can be achieved. Van Lier hopes that success in this enterprise will lead to better classroom practice; and as a corollary, though he never states it explicitly in the book, he hopes that objectivity will enable teachers more clearly to relate the objectives of individual activities to lessons, and to relate individual lessons to a course.

Principled investigation of what actually goes on in classrooms is a relatively new discipline lacking an agreed method of operation. Van

Lier therefore feels justified in devoting the first 89 pages of the book to an analysis of how classroom research differs from research in other fields; how it should be carried out; and what phenomena should be investigated. This is the clearest and most readily useful section of the book, and it allows teachers to begin planning relevant research projects for the contexts in which they work.

Van Lier is very clear about the limitations of the results of such research. Since our understanding of the learning process in and out of the classroom is restricted, it is inappropriate to expect classroom research to produce the kind of causal statements (such as technique "A" will produce effect "B") common in physical sciences. What we can expect is that classroom research will provide not a *complete* understanding but a *better* understanding of what goes on.

Once van Lier has set the parameters within which classroom research can operate, he addresses the issue of how it is best carried out. He adopts the view that classroom research is a help to understanding language learning rather than a means of generating universal theories. He suggests that any piece of research should begin with transcription — a kind of insurance policy against overlooking important phenomena. The task of recording and transcribing the language which teachers and students use is time-consuming, but crucial if classroom research is to make any valid claims to objectivity. The data on which one makes any kind of inference must, after all, be made available for scrutiny.

I found the explanation of how transcription can be facilitated with the use of techniques borrowed from studies in discourse analysis somewhat difficult to follow. Van Lier does provide a helpful appendix on transcribing, but the text itself often seemed overwrought with detail, clouding rather than clarifying the issue.

What of the subjects van Lier considers amenable to the kind of classroom research he has in mind? He begins by making the uncontentious point that teachers and researchers are very likely to highlight some features of the classroom rather than others; and what they choose to focus on will depend on their particular beliefs and hunches about how language is learnt. But here again van Lier diverges from his argument to discuss, albeit briefly, rival theories of language acquisition. When he does return to the point, clarity is partially restored, but still there is no principled alternative to a "let's-describe-anything" approach. The researcher, it appears, in the process of

transcribing, will be able gradually to impose order on the data, so that understanding

> . . .emerges from the data rather than from what one already patently knows, and the transcription and analysis process is an aid in developing this emergent order. (p. 81)

Most of the rest of the book is divided into three chapters which, as Professor Candlin, in a preface I otherwise found arcane, helpfully points out, deals with the central theme of the book. That is how, and

> to what point, and to what extent such connections between traces in the described text [the transcription] and these social forces [of the classroom] can be made. (p. x)

To do this, van Lier applies his method to three issues: *interaction, participation* and *repair* (the ways teachers and students deal with error). Given the author's previous insistence on allowing issues to emerge *from* data rather than *before* it, it is interesting to see how these issues arise as well as how his views on classroom research work out in practice.

The first point is resolved immediately. While the initial third of the book suggests that the researcher go into the classroom "cold" and note phenomena as they emerge in transcription. But this is simply not all that he does. Van Lier precedes what might be called the "classroom phase" of research by investigating areas of general interest to all teachers, which in turn generate a range of questions that may or may not be answered when data is examined. In the chapter on interaction, for example, the questions addressed are:

1. How can interaction be exploited to promote language development?
2. If language learning occurs through meaningful interaction, what kind of interaction can be called "meaningful"?
3. How does social interaction in the classroom relate to the cognitive behavior of students?
4. How do students show that they are participating in class?

Van Lier gives a clear account of the different kinds of turn taking that can happen in class so that the researcher or teacher can compare the performance of students with the interaction options taken. It is in this way that van Lier combines the linguistic discipline of discourse analysis with social psychology to produce the basis for sound classroom research. It is at this point in the book that van Lier's insistence that classroom research is a branch of ethnography (literally

the study of culture) that must cast its empirical net as widely as possible, is finally made clear.

Both the author and the general editor of this Longman series, Professor Candlin, claim their audience to be teachers as well as researchers, but one can't help feeling the latter group has received more attention than the former. Topics throughout the book are given an historical treatment as explanations emerge from van Lier's discussion of the literature. I would have preferred a more direct account of what constitutes classroom research, with the contribution of other scholars dealt with parenthetically.

On the other hand, the book should be required reading for those teachers and teacher trainers who are interested in getting more reliable — objective — information from the classroom. It also signposts ways of maximizing the kind of interactions in the staff room I mentioned earlier. By extension too, of course, its relevance to teacher training is clear: the more confidence we have in what works in the classroom, the more efficient teacher training can be.

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