

***The Experience of Language Teaching.* Rose M. Senior.  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. xiii + 301**

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As the orthodoxy slowly continues its shift from “teacher-fronted” to “student-centred” approaches, concepts of learner autonomy are becoming a well-established part of the mainstream and technology. This shift seems to offer students new directions for nontraditional learning. At the same time, job insecurity, low pay, and a lack of professional status are issues many teachers live with. Are teachers becoming marginalised in language education? In her broad longitudinal study, Senior places the teacher firmly at the centre of the learning process and formulates theories of what actually occurs in communicative language classrooms based on group dynamics and social-constructivism.

The book begins with a précis of the research methodology used in the study and an overview of the motivation behind the enquiry and the contexts in which it occurred. Senior utilises data from five interlinked studies comprised of extended interviews with over 100 teachers over 12 years following a grounded theory approach in which researchers use data to generate theory rather than gather information to support or refute hypotheses (Nunan, 1992). Grounded theory is often misunderstood, but the methodology and the thinking behind it are clearly explained here. For anyone considering embarking on a research project of this nature, Senior provides a valuable starting point and a number of helpful suggestions for further reading.

The author goes on to explore what motivates people to enter intensive language teaching training courses at the entry level (specifically the Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults), and examines their early steps towards maturity and expertise as teachers of English. It soon becomes apparent that the study centres on a particular kind of language teaching career; indeed, the author explicitly points this out. Although the book specifically draws on the experiences of native English speakers teaching multilingual classes in a broadly “communicative” style in English-speaking countries, the author expresses a hope that it will resonate with teachers in other areas. In the central section of the book, Senior focuses on the social aspect of language teaching, discussing such topics

as classroom management, flexibility, rapport, and the development of learning communities within classes, effectively honing in on the ways in which teachers build and maintain group cohesion and positive environments. I believe that much of what is reported in the book will ring true in the wider teaching community, as the author hopes.

In two interesting and particularly pragmatic chapters near the end of the book, the author contextualises the conditions in which many language teachers work and considers how these might affect classroom practice. The rewards and frustrations of a career in English language education, as described by participants in the study, may well have the reader nodding in recognition. Senior also advises prudence in interpreting teachers’ perspectives as research data. In particular, she sounds a note of caution to those attempting interviews for qualitative research; for example, interviewees may claim motivations which do not actually exist in an attempt to sound more professional.

In the final chapter, Senior proposes a model of classroom behaviour based on a balance between the social and the pedagogical. Although teachers often find it difficult to express exactly why they have taken certain actions in the classroom, and experienced teachers often appear to act intuitively, by analysing the reams of narrative generated over the course of the study the author is able to suggest “a teacher-generated theory of classroom practice” (p. 270). This theory is in a sense a localised solution which may have a general application. Senior returns to grounded theory to draw together her research and fits the data to existing theories, namely chaos theory and systems theory, in an attempt to find a match. She maintains that she finds her best fit in the work of van Lier and the metaphor of the classroom as a complex organism. This metaphor uses homeostasis in biological organisms—the process by which organisms adjust their functions in response to feedback—to represent the constant and often subconscious adjustments teachers make to maintain harmony and balance. But balance between what and what? Senior posits that social cohesion and effective learning are intertwined, and the flexibility of experienced teachers is intuitively informed by an understanding of group dynamics and pedagogy. A teacher will thus select the best course of action to serve both factors. This is perhaps described most pithily by the aphorism “Drawing the class together according to its social needs; Drawing the class along by attending to its learning needs; Drawing the class both together and along” (p. 280).

The book as a whole is well written and very readable. There are commentary boxes throughout which point to further reading, along with a

thorough bibliography. The structure of each chapter is topped and tailed with summaries of what came before and signposts of what comes ahead. This enables the reader to select pages of particular interest at leisure. However, I read the book from beginning to end and feel that doing so enhances the power of the final chapter in bringing together the complex anecdotal messages from classroom practitioners. This is a very valuable and enlightening study for teachers striving to develop an understanding of why they do what they do.

#### Reference

Nunan, D. (1992). *Research methods in language teaching*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.