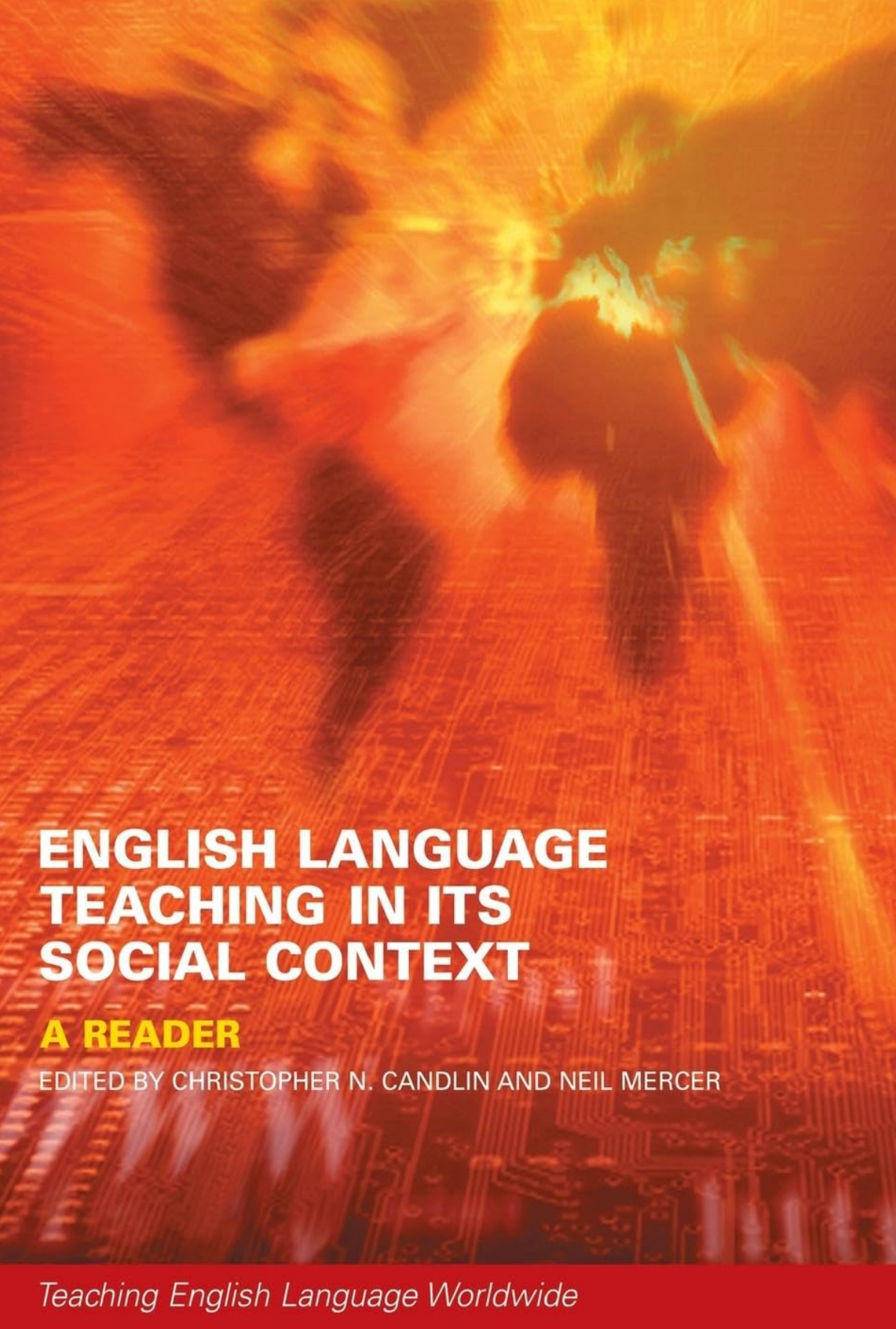




ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN ITS SOCIAL CONTEXT

A READER

EDITED BY CHRISTOPHER N. CANDLIN AND NEIL MERCER

Teaching English Language Worldwide

English Language Teaching in its Social Context

English Language Teaching in its Social Context offers sociolinguistic, ethnographic, and social-psychological perspectives on TESOL teaching and learning and introduces the relevant literature on second language acquisition. It presents English language teaching in a variety of specific institutional, geographic and cultural contexts.

The articles – which include both classic and specially commissioned pieces – have been carefully chosen and edited to present the main principles of English language teaching. They focus on the roles played by teachers and learners, recognise the individuality of language learners, support teachers in the provision of active guidance for students' learning, and examine both positive and negative patterns of interaction between learners and teachers.

This Reader offers people unfamiliar with research in this field an overall understanding of key issues in contemporary English language teaching while allowing the more experienced reader the opportunity to relate his or her experiences to the theories presented.

Articles by: Michael P. Breen; Anne Burns; A. Suresh Canagarajah; J. Keith Chick; Rod Ellis; Pauline Gibbons; Paul Knight; Patsy M. Lightbown; Angel M.Y. Lin; Michael H. Long; Neil Mercer; Rosamond Mitchell; Florence Myles; David Nunan; Jack C. Richards; Celia Roberts; Peter Skehan; Assia Slimani; Nina Spada; Joan Swann; Leo van Lier

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The companion volumes in this series are:

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English Language Teaching in its Social Context

‘Candlin’s and Mercer’s Reader provides key insights into contemporary knowledge of second language learning, the exploitation of this knowledge in classroom action, and subsequent assessment and analysis. By emphasizing the social context of these three processes, and the relationship between them, the book provides a rewarding introduction to the interaction between theory, research and professional practice which lies at the heart of applied linguistics.’ *Guy Cook, University of Reading, UK*

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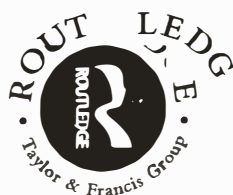
‘In a principled and accessible manner, these three volumes bring together major writings on essential topics in the study of English language teaching. They provide broad coverage of current thinking and debate on major issues, providing an invaluable resource for the contemporary postgraduate student.’ *Guy Cook, University of Reading*

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Christopher N. Candlin and Neil Mercer



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We have reproduced all original papers and chapters as faithfully as we have been able, given the inevitable restrictions of space and the need to produce a coherent and readable collection for readers worldwide. Where we have had to shorten original material substantially, these chapters are marked as adapted. Ellipses within square brackets mark text that has been omitted from the original. Individual referencing styles have been retained as in the original texts.

In this conversation between two ESL learners, in contrast to the teacher–student interaction above, no one dominates or is in control: both learners contribute fairly equally to the talk. The learners understand each other perfectly and are able to express viewpoints and advance arguments. They do not, at least not in this extract, infect each other with linguistic errors or create some form of interlingual pidgin, as teachers sometimes fear learners might do when left to their own devices.

But what kinds of opportunities do learners have to learn new language when they talk to each other in this way? Are the blind leading the blind here, or can such learner–learner conversation become a sort of interactional bootstrapping, where participants assemble learning material or contribute learning material to each other in the natural course of their talk?

The effectiveness of teacher talk and of learner talk as input for learning has been extensively discussed and researched (Chaudron 1988; Pica 1987; Ellis 1994). Teacher talk has been lauded for being comprehensible and criticized for being inauthentic and not attuned to student needs. Learner talk has been lauded for providing opportunities for negotiating meaning and criticized for being a defective model, riddled with inaccuracies. On the whole, research has been supportive of learner–learner interaction more than of teacher talk, but the learner–learner talk studied has usually been interactional (e.g., as group work; see Long and Porter 1985), and the teacher talk has tended to be monologic (e.g., in the form of lectures or instructions; see Parker and Chaudron 1987). We therefore do not know if it is the nature of the talk or the nature of the interlocutor or a combination of both that makes the difference.

Constraints and resources

The British sociologist Anthony Giddens describes the structure of social systems in terms of rules that both enable and constrain characteristics. Just as in a game, and I include the special sense that Ludwig Wittgenstein attaches to “language game,” the social world is governed by rules that allow certain moves to be made while disallowing (or disfavoring) others.¹ In a game like chess, these rules and moves are clear and circumscribed, but in social settings the rules are often tacit and ambiguous, and their precise interpretation or definition may have to be negotiated in interaction.

In the social setting of the classroom, interaction among participants takes place against a backdrop of constraints and resources that are in some ways different, in some ways similar, to those that characterize other settings. The classroom thus can be seen to constitute a speech exchange system (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974) that has its own rules for turn taking and gives its participants certain rights and duties. The classroom is the primary setting in which talk-for-language-learning (learning talk) is carried out, and as such the classroom demonstrates the norms for proper behavior (what is called “fixity” by Giddens (1984) or “habitus” by Bourdieu (1990)) that underlie the institutional task of language teaching.

People in language classrooms, engaged in the official business of language learning, tend to behave and talk in ways that ratify that business, in other words, they behave and talk “appropriately” (see Fairclough (1992) for an incisive discussion of this problematic term). Elements of appropriateness, most prominent inside the classroom, may remain visible also outside the classroom, whenever learning talk is carried out in nondesignated places and at nonscheduled times (in cafeterias, around picnic tables, and so on), as when two students in the extract of learner–learner interaction given above agree to engage in a

be called a closed rather than open discourse format, in that it structurally and functionally controls what takes place. It is like a discursive guided bus tour, but the itinerary is often unknown to the students.

Students' opportunities to exercise initiative (see van Lier 1988; Kinginger 1994) or to develop a sense of control and self-regulation (a sense of ownership of the discourse, a sense of being empowered) are extremely restricted in the IRF format. Not only are student utterances often highly elliptical and syntactically reduced, occurring only in the response slot, sandwiched between two teacher turns (van Lier 1996a), they also prevent the student from doing turn taking, topic development, and activity structuring work. They do not allow, to any significant extent, negotiation of the direction of instruction.

Given these basic features, how does IRF relate to current recommendations of co-construction, responsive teaching (Bowers and Flinders 1990; Shuy 1991), or the instructional conversation (Tharp and Gallimore 1988), especially if such recommendations are discussed from the perspective of critical pedagogy (Darder 1991; Shor 1992)? I explore this question from three different though related angles.

Vygotsky's zone of proximal development and the notion of pedagogical scaffolding

Lev Vygotsky discusses the range of activities a learner can accomplish with the assistance of a more capable person, such as a teacher. At any point in a learner's development, some activities (skills, operations, etc.) are within the learner's competence (this might be called the area of self-regulation), others can be accomplished only with special guidance, and yet others lie entirely outside the learner's scope. The middle band of activity, which is naturally the focus of pedagogical action, is referred to by Vygotsky as the zone of proximal development (1978). Working within this zone (the "construction zone" in Newman, Griffin, and Cole), a teacher develops strategies for assisting the learner. The various kinds of assistance, which guide a learner into an activity that initially is too complex, are often called scaffolding (Bruner 1983).

The initiation-response-feedback exchange, at least when it moves beyond mere recitation and display, can be regarded as a way of scaffolding instruction, a way of developing cognitive structures in the zone of proximal development, or a way of assisting learners to express themselves with maximum clarity. IRF is frequently used to draw on students' prior experiences and current background knowledge to activate mental schemata and to establish a platform of shared knowledge that will facilitate the introduction and integration of new knowledge. IRF used in several steps in a lesson or during one activity among other activities (see Wells 1993), contributes to the attainment of a larger goal. Once it has served its purpose, it yields to other ways of structuring participation.

Scaffolding, to be of true pedagogical benefit, must be temporary. The scaffold must be gradually dismantled as the learner shows signs of being capable of handling more of the task in question. This process is called handover (Bruner 1983), and without it scaffolding would simply breed dependence and helplessness. It is unclear whether IRF has in its structure the flexibility to effect handover. I suspect that, for handover to be possible, IRF must be abandoned at some point to make place for autonomous learner discourse. This switch from IRF to more open discourse structures may be a crucial pedagogical decision point, and research should focus on it closely.