As the communicative approach follows its meandering route through the foreign language teaching landscape, it continues to change in colour and shape. Its linguistic aims have taken on the rosy hue of emotion as learners strive to express their social identities; its pedagogical form has become rounder as teachers seek to involve the whole person in the learning process. The solid bedrock of grammar and lexis has been covered by the softer layer of sociocultural appropriacy. With the waters becoming muddier, teacher educators find it increasingly hard to develop a clear set of aims for their trainees and look to applied linguistic research for answers. Against this backdrop, a collection of articles with the title 'Pragmatics in Language Teaching' holds out considerable hope.

Defining pragmatics as ‘the study of communicative action in its sociocultural context’, Rose & Kasper (2) have compiled a collection of research papers which examine the acquisition of pragmatic competence in second and foreign language classrooms. The book begins with two state-of-the-art survey chapters which provide the theoretical and empirical background. These are followed by three sections of 3-5 research reports which investigate the extent to which pragmatic competence can be taught and/or assessed.

Kathleen Bardovi-Harlig’s survey chapter addresses the fundamental question as to whether there is any necessity to provide instruction in pragmatic competence? Her answer is a clear YES on the basis of research which shows an obvious discrepancy between native speaker pragmatic competence and that of non-native speakers. Her findings suggest that foreign language learners and teachers (in contrast with second language learners and teachers) place greater importance on grammatical development and have problems with sociocultural implicature. Part of the problem here would appear to be the learners’ tendency to rely too heavily on bottom-up processing instead of utilising ‘frames’ for sociocultural interpretation. The chapter outlines clearly some of the major factors underlying this phenomenon, including limited input (inappropriate models from classroom discourse patterns and books which still focus more on grammar), flawed instruction, level of proficiency and, of course, the learners’ first language and culture. Bardovi-Harlig deliberately avoids the question as to whether or not native speaker pragmatic norms should be the target for learners even though these norms may flaunt their first culture conventions and make them feel uncomfortable. The question is an important one though as it is fundamental to the teaching aims of pragmatic competence. Here, the concepts of Byram (1997) and Kramsch (1993) would be a useful complement to the argumentation. They see...
target pragmatic features as a means by which to understand one’s own cultural template rather than an aim in themselves.

Gabriele Kasper’s survey chapter addresses classroom research on interlanguage pragmatics. She points out, quite rightly, that although interlanguage pragmatics has had a big influence on the foreign language classroom, pragmatics has not often been the object of classroom research. The first type of research she mentions, observational studies, has highlighted the shortcomings of the foreign language classroom as a place to develop pragmatic competence. Kasper mentions particularly the important role of the teacher as a mediator of socialisation processes but also acknowledges the enormous variety in teaching style which means that what the learner picks up from classroom interactions may be very much pot luck. This throws up an interesting question for the teacher educator which is not looked at in the book. In a foreign language learning environment it is common for teachers to be non-native speakers. How can a non-native speaker teacher be expected to provide a native speaker model, even if this were desirable? Intervention studies, the second type of research covered in the chapter, involve actively initiating a certain experimental situation rather than simply observing the status quo. These studies have thrown up certain factors as being important in the development of pragmatic competence, for example: time spent on the task, sustained focused input, collaborative practice activities and metapragmatic reflection. Overall, the findings confirm that pragmatic development in a foreign language environment is more restricted than in a second language environment. But all of this is based on the assumption that the target is to acquire native speaker patterns of pragmatic competence. Surely the foreign language classroom has a great value when the aim is to gain insight into one’s own cultural template via target patterns because the foreign language classroom has the collective ‘foreign’ perspective on the target culture which allows development of insight into common (but different) value dimensions. This question is mentioned very briefly by Kasper (44) but certainly does not have the central position in the chapter which it might have.

The three sections of research papers which follow are exceptional in their degree of cohesion. They interknit very well together but at times this is at the expense of tension and variety. Clearly the collection of papers grew from one root. This is extremely pleasing in many respects. But it also represents a rather uniform view of the field. It is true that this particular collection of articles is unique. However, many of the conclusions from the individual research papers are included anyway in the surveys. This means that large parts of the book are repetitive and filled with research methodology which is certainly important but was not normally a feature of this particular series. It is more common in conference proceedings. Section III which covers the effects of explicit versus implicit instruction seemed particularly repetitive yet inconclusive.

So what are we to make of this book which held out so much hope in the stream of pragmatic language teaching consciousness? My suggestion would be to read the two survey reports where state-of-the-art insights into pragmatics and language teaching are to be had aplenty. After that it is better to pick and choose between the research papers, according to your own specific interests.

References


Controversies in Applied Linguistics
edited by Barbara Seidlhofer
ISBN 0 19 437444 0

Teachers, as Barbara Seidlhofer reminded us at the start of the IATEFL presentation of her new book, need, not to put too fine a point on it, a built-in crap detector (Postner & Baumgartner / Hemingway). There is little, if anything, in the world of applied linguistics that can be applied directly and uncritically to the world of language teaching, with its millions of different contexts, anomalies and idiosyncracies. That is not to say that teachers can afford to be unaware of the theoretical insights of applied linguistics, but they need to able to sniff out the relevant from the doctrinaire. How to encourage such critical thinking has been the concern of many articles in this newsletter over the years, as it has been, more generally, in much of the literature of teacher education.

Barbara Seidlhofer noticed that her students found it easier to understand many of the complex issues in applied linguistics when they were presented with different sides to the problems they were studying. By reading the arguments and by witnessing the ‘unedifying spectacle’ of well-known scholars engaged in public debate, verging at times on the acrimonious and the personal, her students were able to to shed a little of their well-schooled acceptance of authority and to learn that uncertainty is part of our professional life. From this observation came Controversies in Applied Linguistics.

The book deals with nine recent controversies that fall into five main categories: the global spread of English, corpus linguistics and language teaching, critical discourse analysis, second language acquisition and the nature of applied linguistics itself. For each controversy, the key texts are presented in entirety in their original form. They are sandwiched between excellent, brief introductions and extremely useful suggestions for further reading. The list of protagonists reads almost like a Who’s Who of applied linguistics: Carter, Cook, Kachru, Long, Phillipson, Quirk, Widdowson to name but a few.

Teachers cannot afford to be unaware of the theoretical insights of applied linguistics, but they need to able to sniff out the relevant from the doctrinaire.

As a resource for teacher educators, it would be hard to overestimate the value and potential of this book. Gathered together in one neat volume and tagged with a set of provocative study questions that can be applied to any of the texts, you can finally bin some of those dog-eared files and tattered journals that fill up your shelves. Invaluable.

WANT TO FIND OUT MORE?
You can read Philip’s interview with Barbara Seidlhofer in the Features section of this newsletter.