Book reviews

Classroom management in language education

Reviewed by Eva Bernat

Without doubt, classroom management is a core element in every teacher’s daily professional experience. It is the orchestration of learning involving all its cognitive, affective, social and behavioural facets within a particular pedagogical framework. In this book, Wright discusses the multi-dimensionality of classroom management in considerable depth, spanning 16 chapters, and covers numerous issues reflective of past and present models of pedagogy.

Contemporary trends in language education have been particularly influential in prompting the reassessment of classroom management issues. As we increasingly debate ‘post-communicative’ and ‘post-method’ language teaching, the focus shifts from what is prescribed in local classrooms to what is possible. This allows us to move closer, in the 21st century, to what is envisaged by some liberal practitioners, such as van Lier (2004), who sees the ‘ecological classroom’ as diverse, adaptive, dynamic and responsive, rather than structured and ordered. Such emergent paradigm shifts necessitate new ways of managing learning in what are traditionally perceived as formal contexts. Wright’s book touches on these new trends, inviting readers on a journey, not only of rediscovering fundamental principles of classroom management, but also of finding new approaches reflective of those trends.

The book comprises four parts, each reflecting a different focus. Part 1, ‘Issues and themes in classroom management’, outlines the conceptual framework for understanding how classrooms are managed. Wright discusses various aspects of formal and informal learning contexts, ranging from the observable (for example, talk, movement, fixtures, space) to the unobservable (for example, individual cognitive and affective factors, social and psychological factors). He makes a point of distinguishing how educational value systems and conceptions of the curriculum, ranging from the reproductionist (distributing rather than manufacturing knowledge) to progressive (developing individuals and valuing diversity), impact the ways these observable and unobservable factors are perceived and managed. Furthermore, he notes that the arrival of ‘virtual classrooms’ creates particular challenges for educators and raises questions of the management of practices in borderless learning contexts, which have so far been given
little attention in the literature.

In Part 2, ‘Classroom management practices’, Wright examines a selection of research studies that illuminate our understanding of classroom management practices at the micro and macro levels. In Chapter 11, the aspect of managing engagement in the classroom is given considerable attention, focusing on the affective domain. The spread of ‘humanism’ to English-language education during the 1970s and 1980s has seen a growth in consensus that the ‘climate’ of the classroom constitutes a key foundation for the learning activity. Wright brings the elements of trust, power and changing teachers’ roles to the fore. Other issues such as group building, dimensions of power and control, cooperative learning and anxiety management are also discussed. In Chapter 13, Wright proposes future directions in research that build predominantly on the area of teachers’ cognition and practices.

Part 3, ‘Researching classroom management’, makes an attempt to reaffirm the topic of classroom management as a scientific inquiry, despite the ‘soft’ data it often entails. It outlines ways in which research on classroom management can be designed and conducted, and invites the reader to challenge or corroborate some of the issues raised in Part 1 and 2 in new contexts. The focus in this section is predominantly on providing ideas about how readers may wish to use or adapt several of the reported projects in their own particular contexts. For example, Chapter 15 outlines many departure points for pursuing future empirical research on language classroom management by listing potential areas of exploration. Here, classroom teachers are given step-by-step, specific guidelines on how to investigate time management, space management, the affective domain and participation, among others. For the busy teacher, these small action-research-type reflective activities seem very doable and not necessarily time consuming.

Part 4, ‘Resources’, lists a number of available resources that could facilitate further research and practice in the area. It includes several comprehensive lists of key texts, teachers’ resources, teacher education resources, researchers’ resources, journals, databases, professional associations and Internet sites.

Doing justice to a topic such as classroom management is always a challenge, given its enormous scope. Wright has managed to cover an exhaustive number of aspects of classroom management and strikes a good balance between theory and practice. However, one cannot help but notice some small, yet seemingly significant, gaps. First, while much is written about ‘classroom culture’, there is a paucity of discussion about
managing ‘culture in the classroom’. Given the inherent cultural diversity of language classrooms in particular in many parts of the world, managing a multi-cultural classroom would have been a very worthwhile area to explore. Naturally, language learners who come from very diverse ethnic backgrounds bring with them different cultural value systems and beliefs, cultural traits and culturally based expectations, which often require addressing. Second, there appears to be little distinction made between the concepts of pedagogy and andragogy. Since the differences between managing a classroom of young children and managing a classroom of mature adults are paramount, such a distinction seems noteworthy and desirable.

As the author states, Classroom management in language education is not a practical reference on ‘how to’. What it is, is an authoritative and comprehensive synthesis of theories and research findings from the field of education and educational psychology, among others, which is deeply informative. Teachers, researchers and graduate students in language education will find a thorough, scholarly, state-of-the art overview of theoretical frameworks and existing empirical findings related to classroom management that are presented to the reader in a very clear and succinct way.

REFERENCES