

# Reviews

*Intercultural Business Communication*. Robert Gibson. Oxford University Press, 2002. xii + 111 pp.

*Reviewed by*  
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This book is one volume in a series called *Oxford Handbooks for Language Teachers*. The series is intended as a reference for language teachers and teacher trainers, as well as a source for seminars and courses for teachers. *Intercultural Business Communication* introduces the growing field of intercultural business communication to educators and business people. Basic theories of intercultural communication are discussed, together with numerous studies, which illustrate many factors that facilitate cross-cultural communication in business. The author, Robert Gibson, is a leader in intercultural training at Siemens Qualification and Training in Munich, Germany.

The book consists of five chapters. The first is an argument for the importance of intercultural communication awareness. In addition to the obvious problems that can arise from nationality and linguistic differences, other cultural differences such as between corporations and professions are also mentioned. The second chapter is an introduction to the research and concepts of intercultural communication. Key writers and their cross-cultural research are surveyed, thus presenting a range of topics such as body language, turn-taking, directness, attitudes toward time, power, and rules. Chapter 3 concerns business communication issues across cultures, including the role of the manager, negotiating, and giving presentations. It does not focus on particular cultures, but rather informs the reader of the kinds of questions to consider when communicating between cultures. Chapter 4 directs reflection by the reader on his or her own culture, as well as offering numerous communication scenarios to consider. Chapter 5 presents a list of ideas to think about when planning an intercultural communication training program.

At first glance, this book might be misunderstood. For those readers looking for practical advice to solve their intercultural business

problems, the book will be a disappointment. Gibson has written an introduction to an academic field. It is intended to promote initial awareness and understanding. It serves better as an introductory reading in a training course rather than as a useful reference for a particular intercultural context. There are, however, excellent suggested reading lists throughout the book.

Although this book is intended to encourage self-awareness and reflection on intercultural business communication, the lack of guidance can be frustrating to the reader eager for answers. Despite numerous excellent example scenarios with analyses of why communication broke down, Gibson rarely offers suggestions for solutions. Sometimes the scenarios are followed simply by the question, "What would you do in this situation?" At certain points he states that people should not attempt to change themselves too much, but this is not explained sufficiently. Furthermore, the self-awareness activities are rather sparse. Since this book is also intended to be used in self-awareness programs, it could have included more specific activities.

One strength of the book is its clear writing. Gibson's explanations of concepts are simple and straightforward, without being patronizing or oversimplified. He also generally avoids extensive jargon. When he does use technical terms, the glossary is helpful. There are abundant graphs and illustrations to explain recent research, as well as numerous examples of cases and problems, which the reader is invited to consider. However, a shortcoming of this simplified approach is that often ideas are not fully explained, such as in the section about negotiating. Despite the many illustrations and graphs, several are not explained at all, and it is not apparent what they represent. In addition, the final chapter on setting up a cross-cultural training program needs more development, as very little substantial advice is given for possible training.

Nevertheless, this book serves as an enjoyable and intelligent introduction to the study of intercultural communication. While some of the concepts might seem obvious to any experienced expatriate worker, such a reader might still find the book useful in its clarification of research issues and confirmation of hunches. Many of the research findings are surprising and belie traditional stereotypes about misunderstandings. Gibson avoids the convenient categorization of the world into the East and West so common in the media. Some of the most enlightening examples of misunderstandings come from communication breakdown between "Westerners" of different cultures. This book can help one ask the right questions when considering a communication problem. It is an enlightening book to read.

*Individual Freedom in Language Teaching*. Christopher Brumfit.  
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. 207 pp.

*Reviewed by*

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In this book, Christopher Brumfit delivers ambitiously, but succinctly, an extensive overview of issues pertaining to language in education. For many postgraduate EFL and ESL teachers, his name will be familiar at least for having discussed the distinction between accuracy and fluency in language learning (Brumfit, 1984). In compiling this book, he draws on more than 20 years of careful thought and experience in the field.

The title may be misleading. It is not about project work and other practical ways of promoting autonomy for learners. However, it does use practical examples in its consideration of the roles of teachers and learners within the educational systems they operate. A caveat is that the book is written from a British perspective, shown explicitly by one part called "Language in British education" and a chapter entitled "British cultural studies."

The book is divided into six parts, each with between one and three chapters. Part 1 is called "Language and education" and in the first chapter, Brumfit sets out the ground he is going to cover. The third chapter of that section is a valuable discussion of the pros and cons of "Simplification and the teacher." As the author says, "...all simplification betrays somebody; but having no simplification betrays everybody to confused communication. Teachers have to learn to resolve this paradox in their professional practice" (p. 37).

This leads in to the short, but useful, part 2, entitled "Second language learning." Another reviewer, Maley (2002), has said this part does "not break new ground" (p. 335), but the first chapter, especially, "Teaching communicative competence" will be useful to many teachers because it goes to the heart of what we try to do. It is helpful in defining terms such as communicative competence and the various ways they are used by different people in the field of applied linguistics.

The other section of the book of most interest is part 6, called "Research and understanding." Brumfit sets out a rationale for research and outlines various procedures and techniques available to researchers, who, Brumfit argues, should include teachers. He realizes, however, that as "...research is a type of contemplation (however systematic) while

teaching is a type of action” (p. 153), it is often difficult to combine the two. His discussion openly reveals his mixed feelings about the necessity for teachers to do research in order to gain more understanding of their learners. Although he argues that “a research perspective towards our work will always be desirable, in all places and under all conditions” (p. 157), he recognizes that “...many competent teachers reflect very little...without failing to be teachers. Good teaching is entirely possible without a researching perspective on the part of the teacher” (p. 154).

“Language in British education,” the title of part 3, sounds narrow but even those with no particular interest in the topic will benefit from skimming it, especially the section that describes language in society. Readers with a particular interest in the topic of part 4, “Literature and education” will find it too short. However, Brumfit does address important considerations regarding literature and the canon.

Part 5, “The politics of language teaching,” summarizes many of the points in the growing body of work on language rights in socially and linguistically underprivileged communities and the position of English in the world.

Brumfit’s conclusion is that “What applied linguistics needs...is a plurality of approaches” (p. 186). The applied linguistics field has developed in such a way over the last 30 or 40 years that sniping and dismissive criticisms have been fired by camps interested in different and often mismatched aspects. Brumfit concludes that there needs to be communication and respectful criticism between the different approaches.

This book assumes a fairly advanced level of knowledge of the field. It is heavy on references and the arguments are densely presented. It is therefore not a racy read: it is, however, a rewarding one, particularly as a theoretical and conceptual overview, which is wherein its value lies.

### References

- Brumfit, C. J. (1984). *Communicative methodology in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Maley, A. (2002). Individual freedom in language teaching. *ELT Journal*, 56 (3), 335-337.

*Phonetics*. Peter Roach. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. X + 116 pp.

Reviewed by  
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This book is one of the latest contributions to the *Oxford Introductions to Language Study* series. Editor H.G. Widdowson states the aim of the series as “providing access to specialist knowledge and stimulating an awareness of its significance” (p. x). About the size of a graded reader, the emphasis is on *introduction*. Roach succeeds in writing a book capable of whetting the appetite for phonetics and for an increasing awareness of related issues, without burdening the reader with an excessive amount of technical jargon. When specialist language is necessary it is highlighted in bold, indicating that a succinct definition can be found in the glossary.

However, as Widdowson points out in the preface, this is not the *Idiot’s Guide to Phonetics* nor was it meant to meet the needs of language teachers or enthusiasts trying to troubleshoot pronunciation problems. Instead, it is an up-to-date introductory survey on phonetics, designed for those who find the more specialist texts overwhelming.

Following the structure maintained for the entire series, the book consists of four sections; survey, readings, references, and glossary. The survey provides a foundation to phonetics, reminiscent of what one might have experienced in a certificate course in TEFL. This section makes up the bulk of the book, consisting of nine chapters including the “Science of Speech” and “Sounds in Systems.” In conjunction with the glossary, the survey section informs the reader of the latest terms preferred by specialists in the field, such as the tendency to replace the name “Received Pronunciation” (RP) with “BBC Accent” when referring to the supposed standard accent of English. Specialists often employ such terms in journals, books, and presentations to the dismay of those less familiar with the subject. If you are unable to distinguish between the terms “accent” and “dialect,” you will probably find thumbing through this book helpful.

Reading through the first chapter, I felt the survey does not provide enough detail to acquaint a novice with the revised *Chart of the International Phonetic Alphabet*. Roach does give additional support in the seven pages on classification comprising chapter 3. However, it is

unlikely that the inclusion of the chart will be of much use to those just becoming familiar with the subject. Again, the focus is on introduction. Chapter 5 provides a refreshingly clear and succinct discussion on suprasegmentals. Roach explains terms such as stress, intonation (with particularly clear illustrations on pitch), and rhythm, while identifying current issues, such as the stress-timed and syllable-timed claims made about English.

I particularly appreciated the inclusion of a graded bibliography. Comments in the reference section classify books for further reading into three levels of difficulty, with a grading system easily interpretable by beginners. However, each chapter is supported with only three suggested further readings. This is unfortunate, as the author undoubtedly could have provided a more extensive list of recommendations.

The real nagging question is who would be the ideal audience for this book. It might be adequate for someone who would like to wade in the shallow end of phonetics before being thrown into the deep end by readings for an M.A. course. I do find it hard to believe someone would pick up a book on phonetics for light reading. If you are familiar with Roach, and you have already read his *English Phonetics and Phonology* (2000), you are unlikely to find anything you have not previously heard or read. On the other hand, if you are just stepping into the world of phonetics, this might be a way to test the waters before plunging in.

### References

Roach, P. (2000). *English phonetics and phonology* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

***The Atoms of Language: The Mind's Hidden Rules of Grammar. Mark C. Baker. New York: Basic Books, 2001. xi + 276 pp.***

*Reviewed by*

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In *The Atoms of Language* Mark C. Baker sets out to account for the apparent differences among the world's many languages and, more importantly, for the significant similarities these surface differences can serve to conceal. As early as the book's enticing opening pages, Baker

begins to sketch out the analogy suggested by the title. Just as we have learned to accept that “all the multifarious materials we find around us are made up of a mere 100 different kinds of atoms in various arrangements, “we must,” he suggests, “learn to understand that differences in languages also result from the interaction among a small number of discrete factors called parameters” (p. ix). These parameters, Baker argues, are the atoms of language. That Baker elects to use chemistry, a discipline with which readers may be even less familiar than the one he hopes to elucidate, may seem an odd choice. So lucid are his explanations in these early chapters, though, that his extended analogy which, he later admits, has its limits, allows him to illustrate and illuminate many issues, which might otherwise perplex the layperson.

By employing this analogy, Baker is able to help us to understand that things which appear very different can, in fact, be quite similar. No one, for example, would mistake hydrogen peroxide ( $H_2O_2$ ) for water ( $H_2O$ ), but the actual difference between them is the single additional atom of oxygen in the hydrogen peroxide molecule. Likewise, a language such as Mohawk, on its surface entirely different from English, is in fact not so distant from English as it appears. Baker explains that, although “zero percent of actual Mohawk sentences have the same structure as their English counterparts,” these substantial surface differences are traceable back to a change in the setting of just one parameter, the poly synthesis parameter (p. 114). Baker defines a parameter as “a choice point in the general recipe for human language...an ingredient that can be added in order to make one kind of language or left out in order to make another kind” (p. 57). In determining the setting of the poly synthesis parameter, English and Mohawk have made different choices, and this one small difference—a difference which is, one might say, of about the same significance as that of a single atom in a chemical compound—accounts for (along with the languages’ entirely different vocabularies) the incommensurability of English and Mohawk as they are actually spoken.

Just as chemistry, however, is not primarily concerned with elements in isolation but rather with “how those elements combine into a myriad of mixtures, alloys, and compounds whose properties are complex functions of their atomic parts” (p. 123), neither is linguistics primarily concerned with single parameters in isolation. Rather, to fully explain a language, it is necessary to examine the interactions between the several parameters, which, typically, combine to establish the basic properties of the grammar of a language. In chapter 5, drawing on examples from

a wide range of languages, Baker discusses in detail these sorts of interactions.

Still employing the analogy he has drawn between chemistry and linguistics Baker explains in the penultimate chapter what he understands to be the state of linguistics today. He believes that linguistics, a much younger discipline than chemistry, is at about the point at which chemistry was in the mid-nineteenth century when Mendeleev organized the known elements into the systematic arrangement we call the Periodic Table. The important thing to note about this table is that though it was incomplete—not all the elements had, in Mendeleev's time, been identified—it predicted the existence of those unknown entities: there were spaces left open for them. Likewise, as linguists have identified some—but not all—of the parameters which define the grammar of a language, Baker argues that linguistics is ready for its Mendeleev, a figure or figures who will organize the atoms of language—parameters—into a comprehensive system with, one hopes, predictive ability comparable to that of Mendeleev's Table. Baker goes on to explain in some detail how one might go about constructing such a catalog, and even, takes a tentative stab at doing so himself.

The book's concluding chapter is the most speculative, the most polemical and, therefore, the most interesting. Here Baker focuses on the key question: "Why are there parameters?" (p. 199). He believes that this question is as yet unanswered, and for a good reason: It lies outside of our current competence. "Our understanding of the nature of human beings," he writes, "seems to be short at least one major idea" (p. 230). Until this new idea, this shifted paradigm, emerges—if it emerges—Baker urges that, rather than being shoe-horned into what he calls "the current intellectual world's broad explanatory paradigms: the political dynamics of cultural transmission and the cultural dynamics of evolutionary biology," the question should remain a question (p. 200). This seems sensible, and even placing this fundamental conundrum to one side (just as physics has placed questions about the origin and meaning of the universe to one side), one is sure that Baker and his colleagues will have their work cut out for them identifying and describing additional parameters and, if Baker's project is embraced, organizing them into a linguistic version of the Periodic Table.

*The Atoms of Language* is an excellent introduction to the work which has been done, and which has yet to be done, in the area of parametric theory.

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