

BOOK WATCH

The Art of Conversation: A Guided Tour of a Neglected Pleasure

Catherine Blythe. 2009. New York: Gotham Books.

Reviewed by Meredith Stephens

“My hell is not, as it was for Sartre, other people. It is a twenty-first century with six billion plus of us, on a shrinking planet, with dwindling resources, not talking.” (Blythe, 2009, p. 21)

What a welcome read this is for teachers of oral communication. Although not written specifically for teachers, this book provides a rationale for what we do every day in the classroom, and motivates teachers with the important task of enhancing students’ conversational skills. Blythe argues that conversation has distinct advantages over written communication and book learning:

“It’s no fluke that the monologue-asteries of lab and library nurture woolly jargon. Talking distills thoughts (we know they’re unclear by the befuddled look on the other person’s face) and book learning is harder to absorb than education through conversation.” (p. 17)

Specifically, Blythe focuses on the pragmatic aspects of conversation. She gives strategies for instigating and facilitating conversations among people in the information age, who are at risk of suffering decreased opportunities to refine their interpersonal skills.

This book is packed with thought-provoking quotes which would provide a suitable springboard for essays in writing classes, such as the following:

“Conversation is brilliant at both polishing thoughts and frothing up new ones, and although professionalism encourages us to wring the maximum from meetings in minimum time, serendipity produces many of the best ideas.” (p. 4-5)

It is not a text which is directly accessible to EFL learners, but many of the ideas are of interest to our students. I included an essay question prompted by the reading of this book in a set of essay questions for my students, asking them whether electronic communication prevented shy students from developing friendships. This question was chosen by a majority of students. Hence, the themes and issues in this book are of immediate interest and relevance to Japanese students.

Blythe outlines the importance of small talk and explains how to successfully conduct it. She discusses “the Acrobatics of Attention” (p. 61), outlining a range of tactics for effective listening and expressing sympathy. She gives tips on how to manage your interlocutor: “How you structure your statements may engender or neuter talking points” (p. 119). She also explains how to structure messages

coherently, and provides tactics for managing boring interlocutors. Of further fascination are her observations on the role of laughter other than for wit: “Without its pulse, talk feels dead and social syntax buckles, because in very precise ways, laughter synchronizes conversation’s dance.” (p. 148.) Other topics include delivering untruths in the interests of social niceties, the language of courtship and coupledness, the role of compliments and how they stimulate further conversation, the relationship between communication and politics in the workplace, how to evade, persuade and complain, how to respond to rudeness, and polite strategies for exiting a conversation.

Blythe acknowledges the myriad of interpretations of standard greetings in large multicultural cities: “when norms are so diverse that a smile can be a come-on to one person and a taunt to the next, reactions are impossible to predict” (p. 16). Because Blythe includes references to cross cultural sources, such as the Zulu, to support some of her assumptions, one wonders if she is making universal claims for her thesis. However, some of her advice seems firmly entrenched in western modes of communication. For example, Blythe justifies the importance of making eye contact when greeting as follows:

“Not looking at the other person while doing it renders him invisible, implicitly declaring that either you’re afraid to meet his eye or he is beneath your contempt. Either way it’s bad manners, making you seem weak or pompous – a worse weakness still for making conversation.” (p. 33)

Long term residents of Japan will know that not making eye contact while greeting in Japanese does not mean that the other person is invisible, nor does it indicate fear, contempt, weakness or pomposity. Although Blythe justifies her argument from cross-cultural sources, it cannot necessarily be assumed to be universal.

This is a book that demands to be read quickly; it is deftly written and is hard to put down. Consequently, in the rush to turn the page, one may not absorb some of the more intricately worded points, and it will merit a second closer reading. It deserves a place in the English teacher’s book collection because it brings to life some of the major issues with which we are already familiar from pragmatics textbooks. These issues are of interest to teachers and students alike, and they are particularly deserving of attention at this time when means of communication are changing so rapidly.