**Book Review**

Thomas Hoy

Stephen Conlon, *Chaos in the Classroom*, Bangkok, Assumption University Press, 2009, 459 pages.
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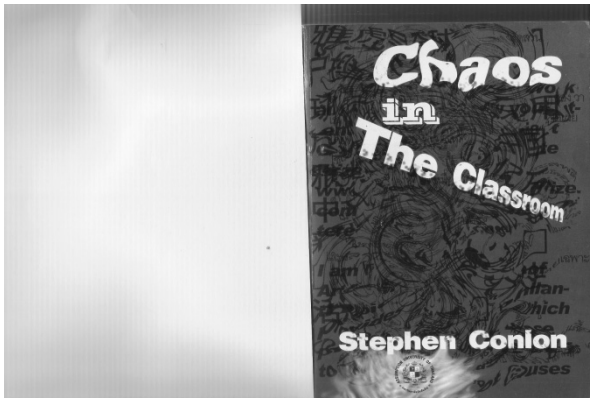


Stephen Conlon begins this collection of loosely related essays in an unusual way. Instead of the conventional device of setting the tone of a book with one or two epigrams, Conlon goes over the top with 20 pages of them. There are comments on the nature of language and chaos from a range of luminaries as varied as Karl Marx, Izaak Walton, Yukio Mishima, Agatha Christie and Aristophanes, to name just a few. It's an interesting way to start the collection but I would suggest one addition that might more precisely capture the problems that social science and applied linguistics has in dealing with the messiness of language. The quote is from Alfred Jarry, the proto-surrealist famous for two things: firstly, his iconoclastic play *Pere Ubu* , which caused a riot at its first performance and whose eponymous anti-hero was inspired by the chaos in Jarry's high school classroom, and secondly, for his invention of pataphysics, "the science of imaginary solutions". "Imagine the perplexity," says Jarry in his *Doctor Faustroll*, "of a man outside time and space, who has lost his watch, and his measuring rod, and his tuning fork." In his own way, Conlon is offering "imaginary solutions" to the teaching of language and he questions the value of the measuring devices that determine the questions and hence the solutions that much applied linguistics offers. Instead, he proposes that we draw on unmeasurables such as art, beauty, literature, soul, quality, experience, and intuition and challenge students with the best language that we can muster.

With a title like *Chaos in the Classroom*, one might expect a diatribe against the current mess which language education is in and some handy hints on how to restore order, purpose and predictability. But it's not that at all. According to Conlon, we need more chaos in the classroom not less. Chaos is proposed as not only the negative absence of order but also as a source of creativity and ideas and as a counterweight against "scientism" and the sterility and triviality of the social science paradigm which increasingly dominates language teaching. Under this paradigm, teachers and their experience, intuition, creativity, humours, knowledge and appreciation of their students and

students' voices and cultures is subordinated to the distant and superior researcher whose work organizes linguistic knowledge in "clearly organized packets" of "useful information" which are then given to students in a linear and progressive way which provides predictable and testable results. But all too often the predictability and testability that applied linguistics provides makes our courses narrow, trivial and boring. Conlon makes what I feel are a couple of very necessary points. Firstly, that "Quantitative Analysis can make reality more striking to administrators and more palatable. It can make clear the need for change, but it is not so good at identifying what changes or what problems may be encountered in implementing changes" (p.41) and secondly, a point that we all too often forget, "Theories and models are starting points for understanding the world, not explanations that can replace the world" (p. 226). He puts this in another way in an essay on Jane Austen: "when we start with an assumption that what we see, or in the case of language, what we read or hear, is ordered, then that is precisely what we try to see and we keep on trying until we actually think that we see it" (p.361). In the same vein, he criticizes the circular proofs that researchers offer for theoretical concepts such as Chomskyan grammar as used in ESL classrooms.

The book is a collection of essays and Conlon explains in his introductory piece why the essay is his preferred form and why it should be reclaimed as a legitimate and necessary form of academic writing. The essay fosters the critical spirit, raises questions rather than offering dogmatic certainties, and, of central importance for language teachers, it values and develops the personal voice. These values are a thread that runs through the book.

Humanism is generally seen as a largely Western invention and Asian autocrats such as Lee Kuan Yew with their notions of "Democracy with Asian values" and proponents of things such as "Thai-style democracy" with its firm guiding hand from above probably contribute to this perception. But in essays on "Classroom Research in the Thai Context" and "The Liberal Arts in Asia", Conlon argues for the importance of developing a cultural awareness that would recognize and tap into a humanistic tradition that he sees as already existing – but largely ignored by the ESL community - in Asian cultures as well as the West. But in doing this he does not denigrate the cultural traditions of the West. Indeed, one of the most enjoyable features of the book is its erudite allusions to and engagement with many strands of both Western and Asian cultural history and thought. His essay on "Student voices" links these different traditions. It asks us to recognize and work with the ways in which students speak and listen in Asian cultures rather than simply trying to impose a foreign model on them. This attention must go beyond teaching micro-skills or research that gathers data on the acquisition of these micro-skills in a way that tells a narrow and trivial story. Conlon believes in teaching as an art and we need to use art as a complement to good science: "If we are going to teach this art, then I believe it should be through fostering a profound humanistic milieu… Against the seriousness of those who speak in the voice of science, we need to balance the comic, or at least light-hearted, voices of art" (p. 187). We need to find the "beauty" of student voices that are "screaming to be heard".

One of the most promising ways of using art in the ESL classroom is through literature. The dialogic and polyphonic voices of literature, its richness and complexity and its "difficulty" offer an antidote to the monologic "simplicity" of the textbook. Conlon is particularly astute in noticing that in learning a second language we are doing literary things – we engage in play-acting, we pretend that we can do something we cannot yet do, we try to harness our inner voice, we play with language, and as in literature we suspend disbelief so that we can believe in our use of the language or in the story we are reading. Conlon is Dean of the Graduate School of English at Assumption University and has nurtured a remarkable and apparently successful program started by his colleague William

Denmark. The program, described in the essay "Voices out of nowhere", asked not particularly advanced students to write novels in groups about the things that really interested them, their own lives and communities rather than the more traditional ESL literature class that gives students a simplified (for simplified, read gutted) classic text that has no particular relevance or interest to them. The students have published these works and presented them at conferences and they have been used in other classes for discussions. Most importantly, as English is being increasingly thought of as *Englishes*, "The English they would learn was their own" (p.261), their responsibility and their creation.

Other essays deal with a chaotic range of subjects: chaos theory and its educational and linguistic implications, academia as a theme park, Jane Austen and D.H. Lawrence, and the sources of creativity. It's a big and messy book, sometimes verging perhaps on a woolly sentimentality, sometimes wandering off in random directions. But nevertheless, it does some systematic thinking about the uses of art and the personal voice in the language classroom and it is written with a very informed, strongly opinionated and deeply engaging voice. I am sure I'll return to it from time to time for entertainment and inspiration.

At my previous university there was a course assessment form that asked the students to assess courses as to whether the information presented by the "instructor" was "clear", "practical", and "useful". The form irked me. I always thought that these terms defined education and language itself in very narrow and prejudicial terms. First, we have the instructor not the teacher. An instructor by definition knows how to tell someone how to successfully perform a more or less simple mechanical task. Attach Part A to Part B. Fold Part C as shown in Fig. 3. The correct answer to the question is D. And so on. A teacher on the other hand might leave the students with questions and ask them to devise their own solutions. A good teacher is an artist and performer and thinker not just a technical adviser. As well as asking about clarity, practicality and utility, we could legitimately ask the students if the teacher had given them ideas and information which was "challenging", "difficult" and even "puzzling" or "unclear" and still give the teacher a good assessment if they rated highly on these responses. In these essays, Conlon is all of these things at times but teachers and other readers who are not just interested in what the business manuals call "efficient and effective" communication, the sort of sterile, narrow, supposedly practical stuff that seems to be made for robots not humans, might turn to this volume for these qualities.

**Biodata**

**Thomas Hoy** holds a doctorate in comparative literature from La Trobe University in Australia and is currently a lecturer