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Critical and Intercultural Theory and Language Pedagogy

Glenn S. Levine

Alison Phipps

Editors

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Epilogue

Paradigms in Transition

Alison Phipps, University of Glasgow

Glenn S. Levine, University of California, Irvine

Many of the preceding chapters take the space of relative autonomy of the classroom as a laboratory for pedagogies, which may align with critical and intercultural theory in language teaching. However, these are potentially doomed to wither on the vine when they are in the hothouse environment of skills and grades and functional performance. This is true of van Lier's vision and proposals, true of the Modern Language Association's (MLA's) thinking at a mesolevel, and true of the neat approaches to technology and language learning that come with social constructivism and e-learning or literature study or post-coloniality. At the end of the day, these new reflective embodiments of theories in practice (or praxis, as Freire defined it) are fragile things unless nourished structurally. So in classes such as those of Elola and Oskoz, Gramling and Warner, Train, Arnett and Jernigan, Parker, or Brenner, the practice proposed and theorized is not one that is sustained by the present dominant order. Theirs, ours, in this volume, is a hegemonic practice, we may even say struggle, to find strong and nourishing enough ecological conditions for these kinds of theories to be able to survive in practice.

For this to occur, there needs to be structural change as well as trial and error in individual classrooms. This is where Arens is so perceptive in her statement that in the humanities theory has existed in discreet enclaves and around the cult of personality, challenging the ideas but not the structures that can enable the embodiment of other ways of being and other ways of doing language learning, or languaging (Phipps & González, 2004). Indeed, the idea of languaging, as embodied language-as-social-practice, itself reflects the frustration of language pedagogies unable to find sustaining conditions for the kinds of practice that are needed within the academy.

Taking the example of assessment, we see that the kinds of proposals emerging in this volume for intercultural critical being and for language pedagogy are not now served by the dominant assessment forms of functional language pedagogy. Testing discreet skills does not "test" the complexity, the connectivity, the context and contingency, the capacity for compassion or conflict transformation. The state of the world suggests that these are capacities that are necessary in a time of austerity, of supercomplexity (Barnett, 2000), of deep ideological trouble and ecological scarcity. Thinkers in all ages have been needed to think about the big questions of every age and the big questions that endure; questions of life and death, good and ill, politics and morality. Those practiced at acting on those thoughts have been sustained by strong disciplines and structures in the past.

These have largely been elites, but in what is proposed here we see a democratization of the Socratic idea that "an unconsidered life is not worth living."

So at the end of this volume, we have set up the problem for future language pedagogy under the framework of theoretical ideas that a diversity of approaches to assessment, evaluation, and curriculum design will be required. In our view, summative tests do indeed have an important disciplining function in terms of breadth and depth of vocabulary and grammatical knowledge and even declarative knowledge about aspects of history and cultures, but to assess in valid and reliable ways the embodied capacities will require other forms.

These can include the following:

- Performative-based evaluative techniques (Mumford & Phipps, 2002)
- Process-based assessment (Littlewood, 2009), including of conflict transformation (see Lederach, 1995, 2003, 2005; Schirch, 2004; Zehr, 2002)
- Scripts of behavior that embody compassion and empathy (Lu & Corbett, this volume)
- Evidence of analysis and understanding of complexity and dynamic structures (Callon, 1981; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; Latour, 2004; Sercu, 2004; van Lier, 2004)

In addition, there is the important work undertaken in Europe, under the academic leadership of Michael Byram and his colleagues, that has carefully considered a range of forms of assessment for intercultural communicative competence, following on from his now seminal work of 1997 and especially in the development of ethnographic assessments (Roberts, Byram, Barro, Jordan, & Street, 2001). This work also involves consideration of the potential for drama (Byram & Fleming, 1998) and critical intercultural frameworks for language learning (Guilherme, 2002).

There is a small but growing body of work to guide the reader in this, which not only focuses on assessing learning in a formative way (e.g., Bachman & Palmer, 2008) but also does so in ways that accommodate a dynamic, complex, sociocultural pedagogy. These include Poehner and Lantolf's (2005) model of dynamic assessment, Lee's (2007) assessment for learning approach, and Smith, Teemant, and Pinnegar's (2004) sociocultural approach to assessment. Smith, Teemant, and Pinnegar (2004) point out that "unless assessment practices are consistent with what we believe about knowing and learning, the inferences we make from student performances and the feedback we provide will not match the goals and outcomes we value most" (p. 40). "All too often," they write, "we see examples where the learning of students who have actively engaged in interesting and authentic group activities is assessed with traditional tests of narrowly defined fact knowledge that provide evidence of only a small part of the learning that has occurred" (p. 40). If assessment is to capture as much of the learning as possible, then it must also avoid the trap identified by Littlewood (2009), who advocates for process-oriented assessment but warns that if desirable outcomes are determined not by those involved in the pedagogical processes, then process-oriented assessment becomes a new means of control rather than empowerment and liberation. In a word, the

assessment measures we develop out of the theoretical frameworks, problems, and proposals contained in these chapters must be as rigorous as the analytical methodologies that are the norm in research in the humanities and social sciences.

Not to do this, not to take seriously the need for the symbols of evaluation and assessment to be congruent with the theories and tentative practices taking place, means condemning these ideas to a lifetime of creating a space–time continuum in the classroom alone where they can be tried as alternatives but never mainstreamed. It leaves the teacher with such theoretical underpinnings to act as a lone ranger defending the lack of congruence with the dominant forms of assessment but never able to shift his or her knowledge and theory into the structures that ultimately make more possible than the individual, peripheral practice of alternatives. And not to do this, not to open a space, structurally, for other forms of assessment to become valid and reliable, according to the needs of the day, would be a fundamental abdication of responsibility toward language pedagogy and the role formal educational structures may play in enabling linguistic diversity to thrive and to be democratized.

Such change brings affect center stage as we begin to notice and fear that much is changing around us and that this needs new understandings and new ways of approaching language pedagogy. So, theory as practice really means that theory is felt, sometimes as fear, sometimes as potential, sometimes as excitement, opportunity, or even irritant. This "feeling" of being structured according to a different set of principles indexes the changes in a series of different ways of talking about language pedagogy in practice. The way different words describe the emergent practices is often moving, sometimes annoying, and often it surprises a bit with its difference. We know we are theorizing when our affective lives are in play. What the contributors to this volume offer is a fresh and much-needed language for twenty-first-century language work and classrooms. These are some of the words we found in use: "positionality," "language ecology," "criticality," "compassion," "translingual," "transcultural," "postcolonial," "care," "conflict," "disposition," and "languaging." These are not obvious words and are not words that we have found in the dominant theories of our functional practice. They are words that show that the world is indeed changing. They feel a bit awkward and difficult. Theory has to feel difficult, has to push us up toward the apex of Bloom's taxonomies (Arens, this volume) and challenge our ingrained habits and understandings if we are to really respond and break some—not all, obviously—of the habits of our twentieth-century consumer-technocracy–based pedagogies of skills and competence production to align ourselves with what is emerging and with the moments described so appositely in the MLA Report. The "grit" of the words brings theory to the level of our conscious attention and moves us into a critical frame, to question what we hear and read, and to question ourselves. The words grate on us and don't fit with our normal ways of describing the world; they bring us into conflict with our own ingrained practices or offer us a sense of solidarity with others in the new things we are trying out and which have thrilled us, too. Such is theory's gift to practice. "Critiques of power," says Eagleton (2003), "are of no use unless they develop a clear political engagement and ethical efficacy, unless it leads to embodiment in action" (p. 220). What better action can there be

than really successful language teaching based on exciting, compelling theoretical foundations?

Which means that this book ultimately ends not in the classroom and its smaller-scale narratives of theory in practice and alternative theory struggling to practice or in some grand narrative of overarching theory that can solve all the problems either. Rather, it ends, when all these smaller-scale narratives and larger-scale theories are gathered together, in the grander narrative of politics and strategic political action, in conflict transformation and in the kinds of larger-scale actions that Freire (1970) was proposing for change, beyond the classroom or group-based training that has been so popular for practitioners of alternatives. Such work will require courage, creativity, collectivity, community—more Cs. The change is already on us.

The writers in this volume are trying to be the change they want to see. They already have a great set of theoretical resources and smaller-scale experiments in their bags. We may need more examples of this, but we would hesitate to suggest that more is necessarily better and instead suggest that what is needed for these theories to survive is a continued commitment to deep reflection and analysis, a continued critique of the status quo, and a willingness to work carefully and with compassion so that language teaching and learning may flourish within the academy and in ways that will not, in 20 years, be like any of those with which we are presently familiar.

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