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Language Teacher Education in the Age of Ambiguity: Educating Responsive Meaning Makers in the World

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ABSTRACT

Language learning happens across many sites of social interactions; those scarred by injustices, conflicts and structural violence as well as those characterised by conviviality of human encounters and acts of welcoming the stranger. This article outlines new directions for language teacher education in this age of ambiguity. I propose that its core task should involve educating responsive meaning makers in the world, that is, teachers who are critically conscious of the politics of their social worlds while, at the same time, committed to growing their capacity to respond to the particular moment of an educational encounter. I suggest that creative arts may play a crucial part in preparing language teachers for such re-envisioned roles.

INTRODUCTION

Along with significant advances in the field of second language teacher education research and practice since the landmark call for its reconceptualised knowledge base (Freeman & Johnson, 1998), the past two decades have also witnessed major socio-political shifts around the globe that are transfiguring the face of language education. The traditionally posed

questions, such as what (an additional) language means in people's lives, who learns it and to what ends, have acquired new meanings in this age of ambiguity: an age in which the hopes, future visions and promises of learning new linguistic codes for future prospects of an adventurous and prosperous life sit alongside the hostilities, anxieties, and tragedies of displacement and exclusion that envelop language learning efforts of those yearning for a liveable life. In this article I reflect on what this landscape may mean for the knowledge base of language teacher education by pursuing two themes in the current research: debates on re-envisioned roles of language teachers informed by the critical turn in language teacher education (de Costa & Norton, 2017; Hawkins, 2011; Kubanyiova & Crookes, 2016; Varghese, Motha, Park, Reeves, & Trent, 2016) and inquiry into the ways in which teachers embody or grow into such roles in their teaching practice and professional development (Kubanyiova, 2015, 2016; Si'ilata, 2014).

Bringing these two strands of research together, I propose that the task of language teacher education in the age of paradox involves educating responsive meaning makers in the world: teachers who do not shy away from the politics of the social worlds in which their practices are located, but who are, at the same time, committed to growing their capacity of 'knowing what to do' (Chappell, 2014) in the particular moment of an educational encounter. I conclude by reflecting on what such teacher education pedagogies may look like in practice, particularly drawing on parallels with creative arts.

HOW HAS THE LANDSCAPE OF LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION CHANGED OVER THE PAST 20 YEARS?

The Critical Turn in Defining Language Teachers' Roles

When pondering the content of language teacher education, Hawkins (2011) has argued that debates and research have traditionally centred around two distinctive strands of competences that language teachers need to develop: language structures and culturally responsive language pedagogies. She further links these debates to more general historical trajectories in conceptualization of language and language learning, which have traversed from a structural and psycholinguistic view of language as governed by particular principles and stored in the mind, to a view of language as a meaning making practice situated in specific social encounters, places and times (a sociocultural approach), through to a critical perspective which exposes the pervasive social, cultural and ideological nature of language use that can empower some but marginalize others.

The focus on the latter perspective is becoming particularly crucial in the context of increasing numbers of school children and young adults who are emergent speakers of the dominant language of the communities in which they live. But while the changing landscape of the mainstream classrooms across geographical locations makes demands on practically all and not just teachers of language to learn to support students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Higgins & Ponte, 2017; Si`ilata, 2014), Hawkins observes that

“Rarely are teachers of students who are not being schooled in their home language, through preservice or in-service preparation or professional development, provided the opportunity to explore the impact of sociocultural issues on the language, literacy and academic learning of their students. And almost never are critical issues and approaches part of language teacher education practices...” (p. 2).

Judging from the research and practice documented in the recent published as well as unpublished scholarship and the growing number of university-based professional development programmes designed for teachers tasked with supporting bilingual children, the tide is slowly turning and the more general focus on the critical dimension in language teacher education theorising and/or practice is becoming increasingly visible in relation to different contexts of language education (Crookes, 2013, 2015; Glynn, Wesely, & Wassell, 2014; Habinakova, 2017; Hawkins & Norton, 2009; Leal & Crookes, 2017; Smolicic & Katunich, 2017; Varghese, et al., 2016). Although it remains to be seen just how widespread such initiatives may be in the actual policy, provision, and practice of educating teachers, it is perhaps no exaggeration to claim that the past twenty years since the publication of Freeman and Johnson's (1998) socioculturally-informed call for a reconceptualised knowledge base of language teacher education, the field has experienced a critical turn: a growing emphasis on the socially, culturally, historically and politically-conscious critical discussion of the role of language in education and, consequently, on the roles that language teacher education programmes must be ready to prepare teachers for, which include but are not restricted to teachers of language(s).

For example, situating their discussion in the context of bilingual education primarily in the United States, Téllez and Varghese (2013) have made a case for conceptualising the role of language teachers as intellectuals and advocates. This role, they have argued, encompasses bilingual education teachers' capacity for adopting a critical perspective in the face of political and social forces and discourses that often work against the interests of marginalised communities of bilingual children and their families. As Haneda and Alexander's (2014) analysis of US-based primary school teachers of ESL show, such a role may need to extend well beyond the confines of the classroom. Feeding more directly into the discussion of how language teachers can be prepared for adopting an advocacy stance,

Morgan (2016) has described a specific ‘Issues Analysis Project’ as a practical example of what he calls ‘advocacy apprenticeship’ (p. 711), arguing that this type of ‘micropractice’ should become a core part of language teacher education knowledge base. This, he suggests, would counter what he sees as increasing domestication of advocacy, a trend whereby the advocacy stance, by becoming well established in the professional discourses and policies of language teacher education, is losing its critical and ideological orientation. Dissenters, therefore, as a more critical alternative to advocates, is what he proposes as the crucial role of language teachers that would allow them to problematize the broader politics of their professional identities, interactions, and ideals.

These are but a few examples of the burgeoning conversations in the language teacher education field which have exposed the need to educate language teachers as transformative intellectuals (Giroux, 1988) who are willing and able to assume a critical advocacy perspective that can uncover as well challenge the socio-political landscape in which language education is located and in so doing, serve those populations of language learners (but also language educators) who are underserved by its policies, discourse and practices.

Towards a Responsive Stance in Language Teachers’ Roles

The critically-oriented debates published in mainstream academic outlets for language teacher education research tend to be located in North America or United Kingdom and are typically rooted in discourse of worsening political landscape of language education with negative consequences for language teachers’ work in these settings. True, such discourse captures significant parts of the landscape that warrant the field’s attention. But it is also worth noting that what is seen as worsening conditions in the ‘centre’ (Pennycook, 1994) has long been the status quo elsewhere. Embracing research, theorising and practice from a broad range of locations and theoretical perspectives may, therefore, provide an additional layer in our debates on what should constitute the knowledge base of language teacher education.

Here I have in mind studies of TESOL educators in, for instance, conflict-ridden rural zones of Columbia (Arcila-Cruz, 2018), in post-communist settings, such as Armenia (Sahakyan, Lamb, & Chambers, 2018), in natural disaster-struck regions of Japan (Ogawa, 2017), or in Greek contexts of schooling and higher education in which children of Armenian or Libyan immigrants were educated (Nikoleitou, 2017), which portray educators gradually shifting their initial perceptions of their roles, tasks and visions by connecting to their students' stories and lived experiences. I also think of ethnographic work documenting Burmese Christian Karen English language learners' commitment to use their apparent privilege of private education for the common good of supporting those in need (Tin, 2014) and how language teacher education might tap into such commitment. Equally instructive are discussions of how multilingualism, when conceptualised through the lens of the African value system of Ubuntu, pointing to both incompleteness (of one language) and interdependence (of multiple languages), presents positive opportunities for envisioning the preparation of language teachers not just in South Africa (Makalela, 2015), but also more generally. All of these and many other studies, while firmly planted in the complex, often problematic, unjust, and sometimes extreme and harrowing socio-political circumstances, also foreground creative opportunities that arise when educators are willing and able to adopt a responsive stance, which demands critical consciousness on the one hand but which precludes pre-determined answers about what to do on the other.

There is also a substantial body of research, which shows that how language teachers and other professionals understand ideological underpinnings of specific language policies and their role in them (cf. Hult, 2014), or how they enact social justice concepts, such as equity, in the actual practice of creating the necessary provisions for promoting and enabling linguistic diversity among their students (Kitchen, Jeurissen, Si`ilata, & Gray, 2015), is dependent on their interpretations, only some of which may serve social justice vision in

practice. As Si`ilata (2014) has concluded, language teacher education can (and has been shown to) shift some of such unhelpful interpretations, in this case, teachers' initial 'deficit' beliefs about Pasifika students. But, as she has argued, teacher education can only do so if it strives to support teachers in genuine inquiry into and connection with the students as individuals, with their identities, languages, and literacy practices that they bring into the classroom with them, as opposed to simply championing the promotion of generic Pasifika identities and funds of knowledge.

The importance of a responsive stance is also illustrated in Baynham's (2006) classroom-based study located in the context of ESOL education of refugees and asylum seekers in the United Kingdom. His classroom discourse data have revealed many instances of innovative teacher-led pedagogies specifically designed to enable students to bring their lives into the classroom and in this way increase language learning opportunities for these students. Yet, as he observes, "also brought into the figured world of the classroom are the unexpected irruptions of student lived experience which can interrupt and derail the planned pedagogical sequence, yet if the teacher responds to them contingently can provide unexpected opportunities for learning" (p. 37). As Baynham goes on to acknowledge by citing previous research, however, responding to such 'irruptions' by integrating them into the classroom may not be the only or even the best solution. On the contrary, rather than "bringing the outside in", deliberately shielding students from "the outside" as a way of preserving the safety of the classroom life as possibly the only point of stability in the students' turbulent lives, may be a more appropriate response under certain circumstances.

How the language teacher decides which of the many options would constitute 'the right thing to do' is akin to ethical decision making in research (Kubanyiova, 2008), which needs to account for both a guiding ethical framework (e.g., a critical/social justice perspective) and its particular enactment in the moment (responsive meaning making in

action). And this is, I would like to argue, the core task of language teacher education twenty years on: To educate language teachers who do not shy away from the politics of the social worlds in which their practices are located, but who, at the same time, are committed to growing their capacity to respond in the particular moment of an educational encounter. At times, a specific ideological framework will provide the much needed answers, while at other times, a truly responsive stance may require its creative application, grounded in the particular encounter rather than in a general set of ideological principles.

I do not wish to suggest that language teacher education can somehow prepare teachers for this task through a fixed set of prescribed practices that should constitute its knowledge base. I do believe, however, that in order to come closer to fulfilling its role in educating responsive meaning makers in the world, language teacher education knowledge base might be usefully informed by research that has looked more closely at how language teachers make sense of themselves, their students and their teaching worlds and how their sense making shapes language learning opportunities for their students.

FINDING SPACE FOR (MORAL) IMAGINATION IN A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR THE KNOWLEDGE-BASE OF LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION

As my previous discussion intended to show, a re-configured framework of language teacher education knowledge base must be enriched by critical perspectives on the roles and tasks of language teachers in the face of existing socio-political climate of language education in their specific contexts. At the same time, however, Freeman and Johnson's (1998) call remains pertinent in its insistence on encompassing in teacher education pedagogies not simply the content of what teachers are thought to have to know, but, as importantly, how they come to know or, put in the context of my present argument, how they learn to engage responsively with and in their teaching worlds. In this second part of my

discussion, therefore, I reflect briefly on what I have been learning from my own empirical inquiry into language teachers' sense making in action and how those findings might inform a renewed framework of the knowledge base of language teacher education.

Accounting for Language Teachers' Sense Making as 'Acts of (Moral) Imagination'

In my recent discussion of language teacher cognition research with Anne Feryok (Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015), we have called for redrawing the conceptual and epistemological scope of inquiry into how language teachers make sense of their teaching worlds and what difference this makes to the language learning experience of their students. We argued that as soon as this line of research attempts to address the more complicated questions of language teachers' sense making in their complex lifeworlds, emotional, imaginative and moral dimensions of teachers' sense-making in action are necessarily brought into the foreground. This is especially the case if such research aspires, as we argued it must, to understand how language teachers' sense making might enable or constrain students' experiences across the broadest range of backgrounds and contexts of learning, using and living in multiple languages.

My own research into language learning opportunities in teacher-led classroom discourse of EFL teachers in Slovakia, for instance, showed that despite their professed commitment to creating opportunities for students' authentic and meaningful participation in classroom conversation, the teachers did not always appear to have responded contingently and "grabbed in passing" (Baynham, 2006, p. 25) the instances of student agency and investment when these emerged in teacher-led discourse (Kubanyiova, 2015). Similarly, they did not necessarily identify the need to respond to unequal patterns of student talk when the moment-by-moment evolving of classroom interaction uncovered opportunities for widening participation in classroom discourse (Kubanyiova, in press). On the basis of a grounded theory ethnographic analysis of longitudinal data in both these studies, I have theorised that

what language teachers are doing as they perform the activity of language teaching is participate in what I have termed emerging acts of imagination: They see and make sense of their teaching worlds through the prism of their deeply desired images of their future selves.

By this I do not mean visions or desires that teachers articulate for themselves or for others when prompted to do so. Rather, I refer to deeply felt images which may be anchored in implicit theories and socio-historical memory and are thus not easily grasped at a conscious level. They are, nevertheless, always embodied in the particular interactional moment (cf. Li Wei, 2011) and, crucially, have factual consequences for students' language learning experience: who gets to participate, whose stories are included, and what is treated as learning opportunity and for whom. For instance, one of the teachers' deeply cherished image of herself as a highly organised educator and competent 'knower' lead her to interpret students' profound investment in classroom discourse not as a language learning opportunity to be built on but as a disruption of the carefully built architecture of teacher-led interaction which had to be minimised (Kubanyiova, 2015). In another teacher's class, a handful of talkative and witty students were allowed to dominate classroom discourse at the expense of the rest of the class, because it was through these students that the teacher's deeply desired image of a beloved and respected educator could be validated (Kubanyiova, in press).

These embodied images, while crucial in guiding the teachers' sense making (hence, the 'acts of imagination'), clearly oriented their gaze towards Self and away from those students who were in no position to validate such images. Yet, it was precisely the connection with these students that was needed to make a difference to their experience in the classroom. In short, what feeds teachers' acts of imagination shapes how they see and determines their ability and willingness to enter into a relationship with the Other (Kubanyiova, 2016b). Making such connections rather than merely professing a general commitment to an educational philosophy or a social group defines a responsive stance that is at the heart of the

language teachers' role as "moral agents" (Kubanyiova & Crookes, 2016). It seems, therefore, that in order for language teachers to become responsive meaning makers in the world, they need to engage in emerging acts of moral imagination: they must begin to see how the big picture unfolds in and makes demands on the present relationship with the Other.

Helping Language Teachers to Grow by Looking

A critical inquiry through relevant theories as well as through more general tools of reflective practice (Farrell, 2015) clearly plays a role in sensitising language teachers to the relationships in the world, often leading to radical re-articulation of their critical values, visions and commitments. This meaning making is crucial to the project of a re-imagined knowledge base of language teacher education. The chances are, however, that such tools may not necessarily lead to responsive doing (rather than having ideas about) the 'right' thing in the particular educational relationship (cf. Waltzer, 1994). This is because a responsive stance that is at the heart of acts of moral imagination also requires teachers to face the Other, not as an object of comprehension and critical inquiry but rather as 'something' that desires to be seen, listened to and received (cf. Biesta, 2015). And this is a conundrum that a renewed knowledge-base for language teacher education might have to face: It may not be by thinking alone that language teachers grow into their new roles but also by sharpening their senses through which they experience and relate to their social worlds. In other words, the aim may not only be an "act of construction", but also an "event of reception" (Biesta, 2015). Such re-configuring might, in turn, require a radical rethinking of both the processes of language teacher development and spaces in which it happens.

I would like to suggest that creative arts, with their capacity to mediate a "disturbing encounter" (Morrison, 2017, p. 109) that shakes us into re-discovering or imagining anew

what it feels like to be the Other, may be a critical way forward for language teacher education in the age of ambiguity. As Anderson (2015) found when using drama pedagogy with her groups of primary school student teachers, the approach prompted reflection which was “more deeply felt through the bodily experience. The slow and layered imagined engagement with the characters and the setting was likely to have prompted more thorough engagement with perspectives” (p. 124).

But it may also be that we need to conceive of meaningful language teacher education more broadly, encompassing language teachers’ engagement with the world in the world. Traditional teacher education programmes may need to be prepared to acknowledge that what happens outside of teacher education may be as important, if not more so, as what happens inside its traditional spaces. Reaching out to cultural institutions, such as museums, galleries, theatres, music halls, street and community arts or adapting research for performance may not only serve the purposes of enhancing public engagement with research (cf. Harvey, 2017), but might be the very practices through which language teacher education can open up the space for language teachers to grow by looking (Murdoch, 1971/2001).

CONCLUSION: EDUCATING LANGUAGE TEACHERS AS RESPONSIVE MEANING MAKERS IN THE WORLD - ‘ALMOST BUT NOT QUITE IMPOSSIBLE TO ACHIEVE’

Educating language teachers in the age of ambiguity means preparing them for living in the paradox; the need to engage with pain (Ennsner-Kananen, 2016) as well as to educate for convivial and creative meaning making (Blackledge & Creese, 2017; Phipps, 2007). This task entails educating teachers who are able and willing to take a deep gaze at what it means to learn and live in languages other than one’s mother tongue in contexts in which multilingualism might be seen as a stigma, a sign of privilege, or a genuine opportunity to enter into an open and creative relationship with the Other. How language teachers are

enabled to re-orient this gaze in ways that touches their sense of who they desire to become and translates into a responsive here-and-now act of supporting their students is what must become firmly embedded in debates and practices of language teacher education knowledge base.

This proposal does not replace the need to focus on language teacher education pedagogy designed specifically to bring about change in teachers' practices around specific activities of language teaching. Such pedagogies have been extensively discussed elsewhere in this special issue and more broadly (e.g., Johnson & Golombek, 2016; Troyan, Davin, & Donato, 2013). Yet, the changing landscape of both what language teachers are expected to do and how the research community is beginning to understand those tasks and the experiences by which language teachers grow into them, may mean a more radical re-envisioning of the scope of language teacher education. And in this, I propose, language teacher educators share their quest with artists. It is 'almost, but not quite impossible to achieve' but, as countless artists have shown over the human history, the quest is never over:

I know of one acid test in the theatre. It is literally an acid test. When a performance is over, what remains? Fun can be forgotten, but powerful emotion also disappears and good arguments lose their thread. When emotion and argument are harnessed to a wish from the audience to see more clearly into itself – then something in the mind burns. The event scorches on to the memory an outline, a taste, a trace, a smell – a picture. It is the play's central image that remains, its silhouette, and if the elements are rightly blended this silhouette will be its meaning, this shape will be the essence of what it has to say. When years later I think of a striking theatrical experience I find a kernel engraved on my memory: two tramps under a tree, an old woman dragging a cart, a sergeant dancing, three

people on a sofa in hell – or occasionally a trace deeper than any imagery. I haven't a hope of remembering the meaning precisely, but from the kernel I can reconstruct a set of meanings. Then a purpose will have been served. A few hours could amend my thinking for life. This is almost but not quite impossible to achieve.

(Brook, 1968/1996, p. 136)

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