Book review


This intriguing volume problematizes some widely accepted and expected theoretical and practical aspects of language education. Damian Rivers brings together a number of profoundly critical discussions of taken-for-granted and apparently innocent, mundane issues that tend to escape theoretical revisits of the field and practical reforms in the profession. As the editor clarifies early in the book, a significant feature of the contributions is that, while referring to various perspectives associated with critical thought, the authors generally avoid entrapment into solidified regimes of critical theories as such. They do, nonetheless, offer thought-provoking arguments that invite one to revisit some familiar understandings in language education, the reconsideration of which may be potentially conducive to conceptual and practical transformations.

In his introduction, the editor states the overall intention of the volume to be an “expression of responsible pedagogy” but is quick to caution against attaching it to “the distant domain of critical pedagogy” (p. 1). The concept of ‘the known’ is introduced as signifying what might be variably termed the expected, the familiar, the normalized, or the taken-for-granted. Explaining a perceptual thread that runs through the rest of the book, the chapter states that discomforts and gaps in social involvements, including those in (language) education are to be viewed “not as products of ‘the unknown’ but rather as direct products of ‘the known’ and its stubborn ideological reluctance to release individuals from a subjugating repetition of truths, beliefs and actions” (p. 3). Familiar notions are argued to need continual revisions that may in many cases entail resistance, since even wrong ideas that evade reconsideration for long, tend to be legitimized through glorification. Rivers, while warning about the pitfalls of empty postmodern perceptions, invites us to problematize the normalized fabrics dominating the theory and practice of language education, and this is what the entire volume attempts to call for.

The four chapters in Part I consider ‘the known’ in local settings in several countries including Australia, Greece, and Spain. In Chapter One, Phiona Stanley explores cultural stereotypes in a number of language schools in Australia from the perspective of interculturality. She argues that stereotypical images fabricated by the tourism industry can pressure language education to manufacture culture as portrayed in those images. Presenting excerpts from a qualitative study, she focusses on the expectations of international students in Australian language schools and the implications of such expectations for language teaching. The resistance attitude the author envisages in this context is to move beyond a superficial essentialist conception of culture reinforced by the marketing side of language schools. This may entail an approach of intercultural development to culture in language education that involves questioning authenticities constructed through promotional materials of educational institutes.

Achilleas Kostoulas in Chapter Two deals with the pedagogical practices of foreign language teaching in a Greek language school. He relies on complexity theory in his analysis of aspects of language teaching in a country where, by some accounts, families spend about fifteen percent of their income annually on foreign language learning. Specifically, ‘the known’ which is encountered in this chapter is a teaching culture that tends to prioritize “grammatical form as a learning objective, and the use of transmissive, teacher-fronted methods of instruction, with a view to developing the learners’ ability to succeed in certification examinations” (p. 65). The author examines the push for accuracy, test taking, and certification as some of the major elements shaping the pedagogical practices of concern. To revisit ‘the known’ in this context, he calls for alternative ways of conceptualizing language education aimed at the critical reorientation of the grammar-dominated teaching.

The sociocultural and political status of English language education worldwide is what Jacqueline Widin addresses in Chapter Three. Drawing on studies on language education in Laos, Japan, and Spain and relying on Bourdieu’s perspectives as the basis of her analytical approach, the author questions the neutrality ascribed to English and the claims of robustness of its teaching and learning contexts. Based on discussions of the interconnection of economic, political, and social interests of different parties involved in English language education, Widin challenges mystifications about those who benefit from learning English, the legitimate teachers, the role of textbooks developed in English speaking countries, and the monolingual teaching orientations. The chapter argues for a need to revisit “how ‘the knowns’ are realized and sustained as ‘regimes of truth’ in the field... [and] how certain knowledge, capital and dispositions are afforded dominant or subordinate positions” (p. 90).

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Chapter Four, authored by the editor of the volume, presents perspectives that complement the debates in the entire book. The chapter focuses on the widely taken-for-granted notions of autonomy and English-only in the education of English as an additional language, that is, the ironic “promotion of language-learner autonomy (i.e., the promotion of individual freedom of choice…) under the non-negotiable authority of an English-only language policy (i.e., the prohibition of individual freedom of choice…)” (p. 94). The author believes that the rhetoric of language-learner autonomy tends to aim at promoting certain educational products while learners have paradoxically little contribution in dealing with these products. Rivers also discusses the interconnections among such issues and native speakerism in teacher recruitment and raises a fundamentally challenging question in this regard: “Should it be considered odd to perpetually cast local non-Anglophone students in their home environment as being in need of corrective intervention?” (p. 106).

The discussions in the first part of the book may appear at first sight to be too local and/or too radical but they may arguably capture the essence of widespread concerns regarding aspects of language education in many parts of the world. Extending the scope of the points raised about these local settings and adding to the political load and potential controversy of the debates, the five chapters in the second part of the book explore broader national and regional contexts of language education. Focusing on countries including Brazil, Japan, and the UK, the contributions in this part tackle several cultural, ideological, and sociopolitical considerations, the investigation of which may be crucial for freeing the language education enterprise form the confinements of an assumed apolitical business.

In Chapter Five as the first chapter of Part II, anecdotally starting with the beliefs of ordinary people in whose view “English is associated in Latin America with Uncle Sam’s muscle power and his bullying behaviour” (p. 121), Kanavillil Rajagopalan discusses ideological and geopolitical sensitivities in Brazil and South America and how English language teaching intermingles with colonial memories of the region. He finds it necessary to approach English teaching cautiously and with respect for local beliefs but also asserts that South America has recognized English as an asset in keeping up with globalization. In reading Rajagopalan’s chapter, although the overall atmosphere of the social context of concern is depicted as a climate of traditional grassroots caution with regard to English and its speakers, one may wonder why hardly any form of resistance is highlighted as part of the path ahead. His position seems to be an already pronounced view of embracing English as a global language and the mother tongue of no one, which may ironically be part of the known in language education (Pennycook, 2006).

Japan is the national setting in which Glenn Toh contextualizes his Chapter Six in which he examines “ideological inconsistencies and contradictions” (p. 144) in teaching English for academic purposes. Based on analogies with the notion of financial derivative, he raises three concerns from a critical perspective: the prevalence of standardized tests and their link to business interests; the push for delivering content courses in English for institutional survival; and the dominance of native speakerism in recruiting teachers. The author then explains two options available to English teachers in encountering these challenges, that is, the ‘reflexive condition’ of critical reflexivity and praxis and the ‘derivative condition’ of the consumerist promotion of the status quo. Toh also elaborates on why he believes English teaching in Japan tends to perpetuate the derivative condition.

Karin Zotzmann addresses intercultural competencies in Chapter Seven. She discusses aspects of intercultural learning and its socio-individual nature and raises the question of the possibility of determining and assessing intercultural competencies. The author reviews conceptualizations of cultural competence and highlights the importance of different ways of valuing, knowing, and acting in particular cultural contexts. Intercultural learning is portrayed as a complex process which involves value commitments and, therefore, hardly surrenders to prediction and assessment in language education. The resistance dimension of the chapter lies in maintaining that: “By designing intercultural competencies as both context- and content-independent, anti-essentialist perspectives paradoxically share the shortcomings of reductionist competence-based forms of education” (p. 187). It is argued that language learners’ ultimate value orientations and intercultural attitudes are to be decided upon by themselves.

In Chapter Eight, Suzanne Burley and Cathy Pomphrey problematize the ‘the known’ boundaries between the school subjects of English and foreign languages in the multilingual context of the UK. They highlight the proposal by Hawkins (1999) about a unified subject titled language. As part of a suggestion for resistance, they propose a teacher education approach aimed at challenging the demarcation of a distinct foreign language subject and focusing on the nature of language in general. The chapter also presents aspects of data collected from language teacher education programs with a view of blurring subject boundaries of first and additional language education. It is concluded that challenging institutionally solidified boundaries between the first language and foreign languages is possible by creating awareness on the part of teachers in dialogic programs of language teacher education.

Finally, again turning to Japan and raising deeply critical and challenging discussions, in Chapter Nine, Julian Pigott focuses on the notion of English as the language of success and its ideological underpinnings. The chapter questions a mere technical view of the (dys)function of English teaching in Japan and invites the reader to consider a sociopolitical understanding of the issue. Perceiving the failure at English as “an act of resistance against globalization” (p. 217), the author argues that applied linguistics is not well equipped to address this condition. Pigott also explains that the ideology of English-as-panacea, as the central concern of the chapter, is founded on a magnified view of the need for English which is in reality much less needed in the Japanese society. The author also discusses some academic mechanisms of perpetuating the taken-for-granted in this regard and denounces purported changes merely defined within the confines of the known.

The editor’s Epilogue closes the volume by reaffirming his advocacy for a perspective and position of hope and possibility. Damian Rivers views this book as an illustration of resistance that invites us to consider responsible education, reminding the
profession of language teaching that our role is to serve “students who trust that our professionalism will support them in a self-authoring and empowering educational experience without compromising their integrity as human beings” (p. 236). The sheer scope of the field/profession of language education and the rate at which the taken-for-granted are reproduced in it hardly allows for a proportionate problematization of ‘the known’ in the field. However, contributors to Resistance to ‘the Known’ do courageously tackle a considerable part of what might be in dire need of revisiting in the theory, research, and practice of language education. Therefore, academics, researchers, students, and practitioners concerned with applied linguistics and language education, especially those who are transformation-minded, may find this book highly inspiring.

References


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