

The Practice of Theory in the Language Classroom

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In this article, the author makes the case that poststructuralist theories of language, identity, and investment can be highly relevant for the practical decision-making of language teachers, administrators and policy makers. She draws on her research in the international community to argue that while markers of identity such as accent, race, and gender impact the relationship between teachers and students, what is of far greater importance are the teachers' pedagogical practices. This research suggests that language teaching is most effective when the teacher recognizes the multiple identities of students, and develops pedagogical practices that enhance students' investment in the language practices of the classroom. The author concludes that administrators and policy makers need to be supportive of language teachers as they seek to be more effective in linguistically diverse classrooms.

Introduction

One of the icons of language teaching in Canada, Mary Ashworth, was often heard to comment, "There is nothing as practical as a good theory." As the United States struggles to adjust to the challenges and possibilities of linguistic diversity in American classrooms, and how research should inform educational policy making, I wish to bring theory back into the debate. Scholars are frequently accused of remaining isolated from the practicalities of "the real world," developing theories that have little relevance to contemporary life. Such critiques raise the question of whether there is indeed a place for theory in the practical challenges of language learning and teaching, whether in the United States, Canada, or the larger international community. Can theory help to inform the decisions that language teachers, administrators, and policy makers need to make on a regular basis? In this article, I present the argument that theory, and poststructuralist theory in particular, can indeed be a highly practical resource in both language teaching and educational policy. With reference to issues of linguistic diversity in the language classroom, and the perceived importance of the language teacher's accent, amongst other markers of identity, poststructuralism provides the conceptual tools that help us better understand and address the complexities of learning and teaching in contexts of linguistic diversity.

Poststructuralist Theory

Like many "posts" in contemporary social theory, including postmodernism, postcolonialism, and poststructuralism, it is useful to understand the genesis of a

particular social theory. Poststructuralist theory, which has achieved prominence in the late twentieth century, is associated with what is called the “linguistic turn” in contemporary social thought, and has its roots in the structuralist linguistic theories of the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure (1966) drew a distinction between speech (*parole*) and language (*langue*) in an attempt to provide a way of recognizing that despite geographical, interpersonal and social variations, languages have shared patterns and structure. For structuralists, the building blocks of language structure are signs that comprise the signifier (or sound-image) and the signified (the concept or meaning). For example, the signifier, the word [tree] is associated with an object (the signified) that has a trunk, branches, and leaves. Together, the signifier and the signified constitute the “sign”/tree/. Saussure asserted that neither the signifier nor the signified pre-exists the other and that the link between them is arbitrary. He noted that it is the linguistic system that guarantees the meaning of signs and that each linguistic community has its own set of signifying practices that give value to the signs in a language.

Poststructuralist theories of language build on, but are distinct from, structuralist theories of language. In particular, poststructuralists argue that structuralism cannot account for *struggles* over the social meanings that can be attributed to signs within a given language. For example, the sign /accent/, as we have seen in Arizona, can have different meanings for different stakeholders within the same linguistic community. Some will consider that a non-standard accent reflects a desirable multicultural focus in American society, and will welcome such linguistic diversity in schools and workplaces; others will consider a non-standard accent as inconsistent with a vision of a united America, and consider linguistic diversity as more of a challenge than a resource. Thus while structuralists conceive of signs as having idealized meanings and linguistic communities as being relatively homogenous and consensual, poststructuralists take the position that the signifying practices of a society are sites of struggle. Linguistic communities are not perceived as homogeneous, but are recognized as highly heterogeneous and characterized by conflicting claims to truth and power.

While poststructuralist theories of language are helpful in contextualizing struggles over the meaning of /linguistic diversity/ in American society, poststructuralist theories of identity, or what some poststructuralists call “subjectivity,” are also highly relevant here. In poststructuralist terms, a person’s subjectivity is defined as multiple, contradictory, and dynamic, changing across historical time and social space. As such, subjectivity signifies a different conception of the individual than that associated with humanist philosophy, which presupposes that every person has an essential, fixed, and coherent core: “the real me.” The term “subject” is a particularly helpful one, as it reminds us that we are often “subject of” a set of relationships (i.e. in a position of relative power) or “subject to” a set of relationships (i.e. in a position of relative powerlessness). The central point is that our subjectivity must always be understood in relational terms, and our subject position is constructed within diverse discourses or sites of practice.

A key theorist in this regard is Christine Weedon (1997), a feminist poststructuralist, who is centrally concerned with the conditions under which people speak, within both institutional and community contexts. Weedon foregrounds the central role of language in her analysis of the relationship between the individual and the social, arguing that language not only defines institutional practices, but also serves to construct our subjectivity. As I will discuss later in this paper, poststructuralist theories of identity help us make sense of debates on what it means to be a “good teacher,” whether in America, Angola, or Argentina. By way of introduction to these issues, I wish to turn now to my own experiences of language learning, teaching, and research in the international community.

An International Perspective

While America struggles to address linguistic diversity in its schools, other countries and communities are also engaged in daily struggles over visions for the future, desirable pedagogical practices, and effective educational policies. I wish to draw some comparisons and contrasts with my own research on linguistic diversity in South African and Canadian classrooms, respectively, and demonstrate how poststructuralist theory has enabled me to better understand the findings of my research. I will ground my discussion in two classroom vignettes, which are available in the published literature (Norton Peirce & Stein, 1995; Norton, 2000). While each of these vignettes took place at different times and in different places, what they have in common are struggles over language, identity, and power - themes of central interest to poststructuralist theory, with direct relevance to language teaching (Norton & Morgan, in press).

South Africa

The first vignette, reported in the *Harvard Educational Review* (Norton Peirce & Stein, 1995), describes an incident in which black English language learners in apartheid South Africa debated the meaning of a reading text that was being piloted for use in a high-stakes English admission test developed by the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg. The passage drew on a newspaper article about monkeys that were shot by police after having taken fruit from the trees of homeowners in Durban. After completing the test without incident, the students had the opportunity to discuss their response to the passage. Pippa Stein, a white professor from Wits who piloted the test, concluded her assessment of the discussion as follows:

The atmosphere in the classroom became more and more charged as the students became increasingly interested in debating the moral issues raised in this text: Who owns the land? Why should the monkeys go hungry? Which parties have the right to the fruit? Why not seek nonviolent solutions to the problem? Most of the students entering the discussion read the monkeys pas-

sage as an example of racist discourse and appeared to identify with the plight of the dispossessed monkeys ... My assumptions about the meanings of a text were seriously challenged. Where does the meaning of a text lie? Is this text about monkeys or is it about the dispossessed? What discursive histories did each individual student bring to bear on that text in that particular place at that particular moment?

This classroom vignette raises important issues about the relationship between language, pedagogy, and identity in the South African context. It is intriguing to observe that when the students were taking the reading test administered by Stein, they assumed the identity "test taker," and performed as required by the dictates of the testing genre. In other words, the students were silent; they worked alone; they observed time limits; and they made little attempt to challenge the test maker's interpretation of the text. The students were relatively powerless participants who desired entry into university, but had experienced a history of apartheid, and struggled linguistically and economically. Stein, in contrast, was in a position of power relative to the students: She was from a prestigious university, a native speaker of the dominant language English, and a member of a racially and economically powerful group. She was the "knower." In the context of this social occasion, the contrasting identities of students and teacher, and the differentials of power, the meaning of the reading passage was stable and unitary.

Significantly, however, during the subsequent discussion, when Stein sat on the desk, inviting comment and critique, the relationship between Stein and the students changed dramatically. Stein was no longer the controller of knowledge and power, and her identity shifted from "knower" to "learner." The students were no longer powerless test takers, but informed community members. While some students still took the position that the text was a simple story about monkeys that attacked people, many students positioned the text as a metaphor for inequitable social relations between blacks and whites in South Africa. Thus, while the same reading passage was read by the same students on the same day, the characteristics of the solitary test event, on the one hand, and the open communal discussion, on the other, led to contested readings of the monkeys passage. The incident demonstrates convincingly that the meaning of a text is not stable, but is re-negotiated in the context of different social occasions, shifting identities, and changing relations of power.

A structuralist conception of language, which conceives of meaning as stable and predictable, would not be able to account for the range of meanings associated with the monkeys passage in this classroom vignette. Poststructuralists such as Gunther Kress explore in persuasive terms how meanings become destabilized in the context of different social occasions. As he notes (Kress, 1993, p. 27),

Language always happens as text; and as text, it inevitably occurs in a particular generic form. That generic form arises out of the action of social subjects in particular social situations.

In theorizing language as “text” (either spoken or written) within the context of a particular “genre,” Kress highlights the fact that language is not a neutral medium of communication, but takes on different meanings when the relationship between speakers change, together with shifts in relations of power.

A social theory of genre will need to be closely attentive to the constantly shifting relations between the language in the spoken and in the written mode, and its relations to shifts in power. (Kress, 1993, p. 37)

Michel Foucault (1980), in particular, helps us to understand not only the relationship between knowledge and power, but the subtle ways in which power operates in society. What he calls the “capillaries of power” operate in subtle and often invisible ways. Foucault makes the case that power frequently naturalizes events and practices in ways that come to be seen as “normal” to members of a community. As Pennycook (2007, p. 39) notes,

Foucault brings a constant scepticism towards cherished concepts and modes of thought. Taken-for-granted categories such as man, woman, class, race, ethnicity, nation, identity, awareness, emancipation, language or power must be understood as contingent, shifting and produced in the particular, rather than having some prior ontological status.

In the case of the monkeys passage, the newspaper reporter who wrote the story takes for granted that the rights of the powerless are secondary to the rights of the powerful, and uses language in such a way that obscures the manner in which the powerful abuse power. For example, the author positions the actions of the monkeys who were defending a trapped mother and baby as violent and extreme through words such as “rampage,” “attacking,” and “hurled.” Later, the writer does not use the active voice to state that the police “killed” the monkeys. Instead the writer uses the agent-less passive voice to indicate that the monkeys were “shot dead.” In the resistant reading of the text, during the class discussion, it is precisely such sets of meaning that were called into question.

The pedagogical implications of this vignette are profound. Not only does it raise questions about the construct of “reading” that is assumed in many reading tests, but it challenges teachers to consider the conditions under which multiple readings of a text emerge, and how these insights might be harnessed to enhance language learning and teaching.

Canada

The second vignette, drawn from Norton (2000, p. 143), describes the experience of a young adult immigrant woman in Toronto, Canada, who grew increasingly unhappy with her English language class, and eventually withdrew from the course: As the student, pseudonymously called Mai, noted:

I was hoping that the course would help me the same as we learnt [in the 6-month ESL course], but some night we only spend time on one man. He came from Europe. He talked about his country: what's happening and what was happening. And all the time we didn't learn at all. And tomorrow the other Indian man speak something for there. Maybe all week I didn't write any more on my book.

While the South African classroom vignette sought to illustrate how poststructuralist theory can illuminate the ways in which linguistic diversity is implicated in construction of meaning, the Canadian vignette illustrates how the poststructuralist construct of “investment,” which I have developed in my work (Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2000; Norton, in press) may be helpful in understanding the relationship between motivation and resistance in Mai's language classroom. The construct of investment signals the complex relationship between language learner identity and language learning commitment. If learners “invest” in learning a language, they do so with the understanding that their social and economic gains will enhance the range of identities they can claim in a particular community. Unlike more traditional notions of motivation, which often conceive of the language learner as having a unitary, fixed, and ahistorical “personality,” the construct of investment conceives of the language learner as having a complex identity, changing across time and space, and reproduced in frequently inequitable relations of power.

The construct of investment, which is beginning to impact more psychological constructs of language learning (see Dörnyei & Ushida, 2009), provides for a wider range of questions for the committed language teacher. In addressing practices of resistance in the language classroom, for example, the teacher could ask not only, “Are the students motivated to learn this language?” but also “Are the students invested in the language practices of my classroom?” A student can be highly motivated, but if the language practices of the classroom make a learner unhappy or dissatisfied, the learner may resist participation in classroom activities, or become increasingly disruptive. Resistance can arise from practices that may, for example, be racist, sexist, or elitist. Alternatively, there could be a discrepancy between a learner's expectations of “good teaching” and the pedagogical practices of the teacher.

At the time that Mai was taking her English class in the greater Toronto area, I met with her on a regular basis. I knew her to be highly motivated and dedicated. She worked all day in a factory, and would take public transportation to her class in the cold and dark Ontario winter evenings. Despite the challenges she faced, Mai was eager to learn English, and made many sacrifices to increase opportunities to learn English. Over time, however, Mai grew dissatisfied with her English class. Although highly motivated, she was not invested in the language practices of the classroom.

Although limited, the data discussed provide a number of clues as to why Mai was not invested in the language practices of her English classroom. Discussed in

greater detail elsewhere (Norton, 2000), I wish to focus on one important issue: the teacher's construction of student identity. Canada has often prided itself on being a multicultural country, and in this spirit, it could be argued that the teacher was attempting to validate the multicultural composition of the class by asking students to discuss events in their home countries. At the same time, however, it could be argued that the teacher had a unitary, essentialized notion of identity, focusing only on the students' cultural identities, and ignoring other identities such as gender, race, age, and class. As poststructuralists would argue, identities are complex, multiple, and changing across both time and space. Such multiplicity was not acknowledged by this possibly well-meaning teacher.

Further, while Mai was struggling with daily challenges, and was anxious about the future, the teacher focused on students' past experiences in their home countries, which bore little relationship to the complex identities the students were negotiating in their new country, and the identities they were hoping to construct in the future. An emerging body of research on language learning, imagined identities, and imagined communities (e.g. Norton, 2001; Kanno & Norton, 2003; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007) suggests that learners' hopes and desires for the future have a significant impact on their investment in language practices in classrooms and communities. In such a context, it would be very practical for Mai's teacher to ask: "Do the language practices of my classroom address Mai's daily challenges and her anxiety about the future?"

Back to Arizona

As an outsider, I feel a little hesitant to address the complex events in Arizona in the recent past. However, some insights from poststructuralist theory, as I have used it with reference to my research in the international community, may have some relevance for the American educational context. In particular, I would like to raise the question of how "good teaching" is defined in Arizona, and the United States, more broadly. Since the issue of a teacher's "accent" has arisen in Arizona, it is useful to reflect on the two vignettes described above. There are some who would consider Mai's teacher a "good teacher" in that she had a standard Canadian accent, was respectful of multiculturalism, and encouraged communication in her class. Mai, however, would disagree with this position, notwithstanding the teacher's standard Canadian accent, and she expressed her dissatisfaction by withdrawing from the class. The South African vignette is a little more complex. While Stein's standard South African accent was a marker of power for Stein, it only had value when the pedagogical practices of the classroom were relatively authoritarian. Once Stein introduced a more egalitarian set of practices in the classroom, her accent, as a marker of power, lost its value. A standard South African accent did not make Stein either a "good" or "poor" teacher; what was of greater importance were her pedagogical practices.

In poststructuralist terms, the sign /good teaching/ is a site of struggle in many communities internationally. It is implicated in changing relations of power, contrasting investments, and divergent claims to knowledge. Such struggles have significant consequences for a wide variety of stakeholders, including teachers, students, parents, administrators, and policymakers.

A second insight, drawn from my research, may also have relevance to debates in Arizona. This concerns the poststructuralist conception of identity, with respect to both students and teachers. In the case of Mai, the research confirms that essentializing a student's identity is problematic. While Mai's ethnicity was an important part of her identity, her identities as a young woman, an immigrant, a struggling worker, and an anxious student, were also very important to her. These identities, however, appeared to receive little recognition from the teacher. With respect to Arizona, and education more broadly, the multiple identities of the teacher are also important considerations. While "accent" for example, may be one marker of teacher identity, there are other identities, such as that of gender, race, and sexual orientation, which are also receiving much attention in the literature with respect to both teachers and students (Kubota & Lin, 2009; Menard-Warwick, 2009; Morgan, 2004; Nelson, 2009). If administrators and policy-makers essentialize teacher identity, it does not do justice to the multiple identities that impact the teacher/student relationship.

What the South African vignette illustrates, however, is that what is of even greater importance than markers of identity is the way in which a teacher can impact student investment in the language practices of the classroom. The same teacher, in the same class, on the same day, can dramatically change the pedagogical experience by shifting relations of power between teachers and students, opening up spaces for increased engagement and interaction. Shifting relations of power may be a little unsettling for the teacher, as it was for Stein, but the result was a significant learning experience for both her and her students.

I would like to add one caveat, however. Promoting student investment in the language practices of classrooms does not mean that the teacher abdicates power. The teacher has an important responsibility to ensure that the activities in which students engage are meaningful to students and pedagogically rigorous. At first glance, it might appear that Mai's teacher was engaging in collaborative power sharing with her students. However, at least for Mai, the classroom activities were neither meaningful nor pedagogically sound. By extension, when one considers the debates in Arizona, the central question that arises is not what accent the teacher has, but whether the teacher's pedagogical practices acknowledge the multiplicity of student identity, and create opportunities for increased investment in the language practices of the classroom.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that poststructuralist theory can help teachers, administrators and policy makers make more informed decisions about classroom practice. Whether administrators are debating the importance of accent in the language classroom, whether teachers are discussing the meaning of a text, or whether students are resisting essentializing pedagogical practices, it is clear that language is a social practice in which experiences are organized and identities negotiated. This research discussed in this article suggests that language teaching is most effective when the teacher recognizes the multiple identities of students in the class, and develops pedagogical practices that enhance students' investment in the language practices of the classroom. It follows that teachers, administrators, and policy makers need to better understand the language practices of classrooms, and how learners negotiate and sometimes resist the practices made available to them. Further, administrators and policy makers need to be supportive of language teachers as they seek to be more effective in linguistically diverse classrooms.

In Arizona, the struggle over a teacher's accent is a window on much larger struggles that index diverse visions of American society, in both the present and the future. Whose vision will prove most persuasive and desirable? What claims to "truth" about "good teaching" are being made, and on whose behalf? Such debates are constituted in language and by language, with important consequences for a wide range of stakeholders. Poststructuralist theories of language, identity, and investment provide insight into such debates, extending opportunities for productive and empowering classroom practices.

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