

Special Issue

L2 Writing and Personal History: Meaningful Literacy in the Language Classroom

Introduction

DAVID I. HANAUER

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

E-mail: hanauer@iup.edu

Ten years ago in 2003, I orchestrated a special issue of the *Canadian Modern Language Review* that explored *Literature and Applied Linguistics*. The issue focused on the reading of literature as a way to “facilitate the expression of individualized human experience in a new linguistic and cultural system and allow the entrance into the language classroom of diverse human experience and points of personal, cross-cultural contact” (Hanauer, 2003, p. 85). The justification for that original special issue was a sense that within the realm of applied linguistic research and language teaching there was a need to move away from instrumentalist positions that situate teaching as solely methodological implementation and the learner as a decontextualized cognitive system. Language teaching and learning was, I thought, a deeply significant human activity within which the forms and narratives of literary text could be utilized to bring consciousness and cultures closer together. There was a need for individual consciousness, contextualized and historicized, whether teacher or student, to be re-emphasized and situated at the center of applied linguistics.

Ten years on and I am editor of this special issue of the *L2 Journal* dedicated to *L2 Writing and Personal History: Meaningful Literacy in the Language Classroom*. Over the last ten years, positions have been proposed that recognize the importance of the personal in language learning. Among others Kramsch (2006; 2009) has explored language learners’ multilingual subjectivity, Block (2007) investigated second language identity, Pavlenko (2007) explicated autobiographical methods for applied linguistics and Hanauer (2010) utilized second language poetry writing as a way of accessing individual experiences during language and cultural learning. In conjunction with the powerful, continuing presence of decontextualized instrumentalist approaches primarily promoted through governmental directives and business enterprises, there is among applied linguistic professionals an increased understanding of the importance of reaching and addressing specific people and subjectivities within the language classroom.

It is against this backdrop that the current special issue was conceptualized. The premise of this publication and collective exploration is that through literacy, and in particular L2 writing, personal phenomenological experience can be reflectively inspected, explicated and presented for interpretation by others and as such can be used as an important resource within the language classroom. Kramsch (2006) persuasively describes how second and foreign language pedagogy and research have lost sight of “the flesh and blood individuals who are doing the learning” (p. 98). I proposed in response that meaningful literacy instruction be at the center of second and foreign language learning (Hanauer, 2011). The aim of the research presented here is to humanize the language classroom. Collectively the papers presented facilitate access to different methodologies and pedagogies from around the world and provide a variety of ways and contexts within which meaningful literacy can be applied. Together these papers both change and define in concrete pedagogical and methodological terms what it could mean to work meaningfully with student literacies and personal histories in the language classroom.

Methodologically the papers in this special issue utilize writing as a research method (Hanauer, 2010; Richardson, 2003). The literary research genres of poetry and narrative are employed primarily within an autoethnographic framework in which writing, expression and reflection are intertwined. As with other arts-based methodologies, research writing based on literary genres provides direct access to the writer-participant’s conceptualization and expression of personal experiences and memories and is, at the same time, a research artifact that can be analysed. For some applied linguistic readers the forms of this writing and the actual use of writing as a research method may seem unusual. To date there have only been limited usages of arts-based, literary research writing as a method of inquiry within applied linguistics (Hanauer, 2010). But there is a growing body of research based on literary research writing, much of which is reviewed in the various papers in this collection, that establishes the role for this form of research when questions of human consciousness and historical personal positioning are being addressed (Hanauer, 2010; Richardson, 2003). Different papers in this collection fall on a continuum that moves from research data presentation and analysis to modified arts-based approaches. At one end of this continuum we have Garvin, Loureiro-Rodríguez and Chamcharatsri who present excerpts of student literary research writing and enter into a qualitative analysis of the meanings present within this writing; at the other end, we have Lapidus, Kaveh and Hirano who have written and analyzed their own writing and Park who presents a full autoethnographic poetic narrative.

Pedagogically each of the papers in this collection makes a contribution both in approach and in relation to the population addressed. Humanizing the language classroom means recognizing the individuality of consciousness, subjectivity and historical contextualization of everyone who is involved. Through a narrative-poetic autoethnography Park starts the collection by presenting her own personal history of migration and of becoming a second language professional. This paper is a model of how self-exploration using literary research writing can be applied by language teaching faculty in the attempt to understand themselves. Lapidus, Kaveh and Hirano, the second paper in this collection, pick up this theme and address the autoethnographic writing of trainee second language teachers. As with Park, the paper is a discussion of personal narratives framed within the diverse theories of autoethnography. The paper exemplifies and calls for the use of this type of writing and teacher-student dialogue as a central component of ESL teacher training. Moving to student populations, the third paper in this collection by Loureiro-Rodríguez develops an understanding of the importance of personal narrative writing for heritage

learners. As argued and carefully exemplified in this paper, the use of meaningful literacy may be particularly significant for those learners who have a historical, familial connection to a language and that are now learning in the classroom setting. Loureiro-Rodríguez's paper is compelling for its ramifications on the design of the heritage language classroom. Chamcharatsri's paper explores the writing of narratives of fear with Thai EFL students. This paper promotes emotional writing in the language classroom through the presentation of simple writing prompts and considers the question of student perceptions of differences in emotive language in first and second languages. Interestingly the paper calls for the use of negative emotion writing within the language classroom and exemplifies how this could be achieved. The final paper in this collection by Garvin utilizes student poetic writing to extend the personal to include consciousness of cultural and historical context. In this interesting paper, students wrote poetry about their own cultural understandings. Once again this is a both a pedagogy and methodology of self-reflection that can be easily replicated in a range of language classrooms.

Overall, the collection of papers presented here paints a fascinating picture of what the language classroom could look like. It could be a place in which teachers have explored their own consciousness, personal histories and cultural positionings and enter into an active process of writing, dialogue and discussion with their language learning students. It could be a place in which meaningful, emotive writing and evocative, significant conversations take place and in which students are fully engaged with their understanding of how language and culture help formulate who they are. Finally it could be a place in which humanity meets humanity and language is learnt and used as a meaningful resource for developing personal expressive abilities.

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