**Introduction**

**Teaching Languages in a Changing World: *Dynamically* Rethinking Literacies and Learners**

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Change is the only constant in life, right? By the time you have finished reading this next sentence, you will have probably registered multiple physiological and neurological changes.

So, why do we resist change? It has been said that creating educational change is like moving a cemetery, which is fairly tragic if you consider that our learners, even the languages we teach, and the tools native speakers of those languages use to create meaning are constantly changing. Texts, languages, and learners are living, evolving things that refuse to be neatly categorized. To be sure, categories serve a purpose: they help us to identify trends and tendencies in ways that help us organize our experience of the world around and inside us. They can also be used in ways that grossly oversimplify and undermine the dynamic realities that pervade our social and psychological experiences: learning a second language is cut off from and exalted over the attainment of second "literacy"; texts are divided into genres that are more or less "cultivated"; textbook grammars undermine the fundamental truth of extensive regional variations in languages or worse, certain language varieties are deemed "nonstandard"; a child is labeled with a learning disability and "exempted" from LOTE study.

This static view of languages, literacy, and learners is all about to change. Dynamic systems theory (DST) is gaining attention in second language acquisition (SLA) research and the study of individual differences (ID), and undermining our basic assumptions about learners and

languages. Rather than being a static, linear process toward greater grammatical and syntactical complexity, LOTE learning under the DST lens is seen as full of upheavals, reversals, "strange attractors" and other dynamic phenomena that exist and interact within and beyond the learner. As De Bot, Lowie, and Verspoor (2007) put it,

> The information processing approach is linked to terms like signal and response, sending and receiving, encoding and decoding, and rule-governed behavior, while the DST approach is based on terms like engagement and disengagement, synchrony and discord, breakdown and repair in interaction, and the properties that emerge from it. (p. 10)

Sociocultural perspectives on language learning and literacy have followed a similar trajectory, centering attention on the importance of contextual factors. Followers of Lev Vygotsky, a young Russian psycholinguist who died from tuberculosis in his mid-thirties, have challenged the dominant "input processor" view of the learner, replacing the passive "learner-as-decoder-encoder" metaphor with the notion of the learner as a full, active *participant* (Brooks & Donato, 1994) in LOTE learning. Vygotskyan researchers have emphasized how language use and language learning are shaped by the dynamic interplay of constantly shifting individual and collective roles, goals, and motives.

Though they have evolved separately, it is hard to ignore the convergence of the conference theme and these two rising paradigms (DST and sociocultural theory) in SLA research. As the title of our annual meeting suggests, literacy and the learner are complex, which may be why we speak to multiple litera*cies* and learner*s*, a perspective that reflects the emergent dynamic view of teaching and learning espoused by the aforementioned research traditions. In this introduction, I will try to give voice to a dynamic way of seeing our vocation within the

framework of the excellent articles presented in this annual meeting publication. As I do so, I must clarify both to the reader and the authors that this approach entails a very selective reading of the aforementioned topic; therefore, the quantity and quality of references to one author or another should be interpreted in that light.

## Literacies*

In addressing literacy in L2 settings, Kern and Schultz (2005) argue that the predominant focus on spoken language in our profession tends to favor an emphasis on listening and speaking to the neglect of reading and writing, which are often relegated to upper-level literary analysis. As a 7–12 Spanish teacher, I, like many of you reading this, did not consider literacy to be an essential part of my work. While I enjoyed the study of Spanish and Latin American literature, I rarely identified with these courses as having any practical application to K–12 LOTE teaching. However, an emergent "literacies" perspective encompasses a multiplicity of discourse communities; there is no "big L" literacy reserved for English majors but rather a smorgasbord of ways to construe meaning and identity.

White's article, which centers on the presentation of his Composite Textual Comprehension model, returns the study of L2 texts to its rightful place at the nexus of LOTE learning. As he states in his article, "Reading presents significant opportunities for language acquisition" (p. 9). He also calls our attention to the "cultural lens" that presents unique opportunities to help students learn how to process meaning from within the mindset of a native LOTE speaker. In doing so, White reminds us of the importance of respecting literacy in the LOTE classroom because authentic text is richly imbued with keys to both the L2 linguistic code and its cultural code. This is an important point to keep in mind since, as he points out, "The

teaching of reading is overlooked in favor of additional grammar constructs" (p. 8). Rather than seeing L2 text as a flashy delivery system for new vocabulary and language structures, a literacy-oriented perspective on LOTE learning invites us to return to the essence of second language learning, which is the interpretation and negotiation of meaning both within and across cultures.

Angelini and Judge illustrate how biographical and socio-historical texts potentially serve both literacy and acquisition-related objectives in the LOTE classroom. More importantly, the choice of content connects a legendary French leader (De Gaulle) to an often overlooked area of the French-speaking world (Algeria). In this way, the authors also demonstrate how the French curriculum can serve to amplify connections between France and the Francophone world rather than perpetuate the cultural and linguistic dominance of the country of origin in LOTE pedagogy. Embracing both linguistic and cultural variation in the world of LOTE fits well with emergent dynamic approaches to teaching and learning, as well as with this idea that there is not just one literacy but rather, literac*ies*.

Amplifying the scope of literacies, as they pertain to LOTE teaching and learning, several articles in this volume suggest emergent professional literacies that today's LOTE teachers must develop. President Sabbatino contends that, rather than serving the gods of achievement testing and AP credit, we need to get literate in our learners. He describes the digital gap, this weird place we've all encountered where our students are more digitally literate than we are, and challenges us to integrate more of the technologies that are part of their daily world into the LOTE curriculum. He also contends that we are not addressing the increasingly globalized job market, something that could put us in a unique position to contribute to the career development of LOTE students. As he states, "The writing and reading skills of our students may not be enough to address the needs of today's and tomorrow's global community" (p. 3).

One way to counteract the mismatch between today's LOTE curriculum and the job markets of tomorrow is to promote early language learning programs. This critical piece of program development is another dimension of professional literacy addressed in the articles by McKee and Pores. McKee reviews the case for foreign language in elementary school (FLES) and offers a global perspective on excellence in FLES teaching that features insights from the Center for Applied Linguistics. She also demonstrates how we can learn from past failures to implement enduring, well-articulated FLES programs. Pores walks us through the city school district of Albany's dual language immersion program, which points to a promising way to embrace and fully use the growing ethno-linguistic diversity of our LOTE students. She describes a model for establishing dual language immersion in a way that optimizes community integration, curricular innovation, and teaching strategies.

## **Learners**

Last April I had the privilege of hearing Zoltan Dörnyei's (2008, April) keynote address at the American Association for Applied Linguistics annual meeting in Washington, D.C. This was my first introduction to a field of research used extensively in math, biology, and meteorology that is gaining attention in SLA research. Dörnyei used a beach ball metaphor to describe how *attractors* and *resistors* in individual cognition influence the quantity and quality of engagement in language learning tasks. Picture the wavy surface of a beach with its dunes and divots. The divots represent attractor sites and the dunes represent resistor sites. These geographical features, like the human brain, are more or less fixed but also multifaceted and subject to change. Now picture a beach ball, representing a particular learning task, being blithely bounced along in the breeze. Eventually, the beach ball will come to rest in a sufficiently deep divot, if one is available. By corollary, it will continue on its journey upon encountering a

dune, particularly if the dune is pronounced. In this way, learning strategies and styles are subject to a multitude of shifting cognitive and social contextual variables. That means, on any given day, that beach ball, whether it represents our LOTE learners' motivational orientation, vocabulary, or grammar learning, finds itself in a constantly shifting beachscape with its own unique array of breezes, dunes, and divots. Grab a pail and shovel, folks!

If DST has clarified one thing, it is the importance of "initial states": set things off on the wrong track and you have just created a "resistor" site; those beach balls are going to roll right off, and you're going to have some extra digging work to make the learning "stick" in so far as that is possible within this view of language teaching and learning. President Sabbatino speaks to initial states when he takes us . . .

> back to the very beginning, when that first day of TL exposure triggered a plethora of positive feedback from our students: enthusiastic smiles, youngsters attentively listening to every novel utterance, intent on not missing one syllable of the new tongue the teacher was speaking. The absolute eagerness and sincere interest in learning how to say something in a different language, to someone unaccustomed to it, sounded like strident and  chaotic chatter, but to us TL teachers and to our students, this was nothing less than a sublime symphony. (p. 2)

Sabbatino's words also speak to the importance of motivation. According to Dörnyei (2003), motivation is "one of the most developed areas within the study of SLA" (p. 21), but centering on social psychology, it finds itself left out of the linguist-dominated core of the field. The search for a "critical period" for learning a LOTE has underscored the importance of an early start not so much due to the maturational constraints that adults experience in comparison to children but

rather because the attainment of literacy and proficiency in a LOTE is a monumental enterprise, requiring a great deal of time and energy (Singleton, 2000). In other words, motivation matters. As Schmatz eloquently points out in her article on special needs students, motivation is a phenomenon that is closely tied to feelings of self-efficacy (*¡Sí, se puede!*). On page four of her article, she demonstrates how we LOTE teachers can edify perceptions of competency, which, when combined with autonomy and a sense of relatedness, completes the three basic needs of intrinsic motivation, as advanced in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000). As you read through her "think aloud" dialogue, you will no doubt note a great deal of autonomy support in her interaction with the student. To be sure, the extent to which our students are motivated is subject to a number of factors beyond our control. Many of us contend with apathy or even open resistance to LOTE study from the social milieu, particularly parents. Matthews confronts the important dimension of parental attitudes. Borrowing from Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model and SDT, she presents a plan for studying ways to recruit parental involvement in student projects that involve learning about French culture and how it shapes students' motivational orientations and achievement in LOTE learning.

In conceptualizing the LOTE learner, the dynamic view calls into question the ease with which we sort students into various categories. A LOTE teacher who enrolled in my graduate course, The Foreign Language Learner, recalled being complimented by one of her middle school students for appealing to visual learners, a category with which he proudly affiliated himself. My hunch is that these labels undermine learning. With regard to strategies use, Gardner, Tremblay, and Masgoret's (1997) meta-analytical study showed that strategies use actually undermined L2 performance. Macaro's (2006) critique of the research on learning styles and strategies picked apart the questionable claims made about these categorizations and

prescriptions for teaching interventions, as well as the research base upon which they were constructed. A clearer picture of language learning strategies also depends, according to Macaro, on a thorough consideration of both the social and the psychological realm, as well as on a deeper analysis of underlying goals and motives that determine the classification of learning activity into cognitive and meta-cognitive levels of processing. In his conception of the processes and skills that learners use in engaging in language learning tasks, Macaro conceives of a kind of orchestration at work in which each learner must act as a kind of symphony conductor, determining what, where, and how clusters of strategies are to be optimally applied to a given language learning task. As he puts it, "Does the good language learner select only those strategies that he or she has come to realize are effective, or does the good language learner orchestrate combinations of strategies effectively, regardless of their status as effective or otherwise?" (p. 325).

In other words, we have to take care not to write off learning processes as subject to fixed preferences and types. Schmatz speaks to the dangers of teacher complacency stemming from our obsession with labeling learners: "Over time, special needs students are simply treated as 'disabled' instead of 'abled' students. Their talents are not tapped into, their potential is not enticed to emerge, and eventually, expectations are lowered and learned helplessness is fostered" (p. 2).

Perhaps you have been following the discussions in the professional literature on constructs such as foreign language learning anxiety or foreign language learning disabilities. Social psychologist Richard Sparks (2006) has called such constructs into question. In the case of the latter construct, he actually refuted some of his early work suggesting that there was something that could be described as a "FL learning disability." A dynamic view sidesteps the whole

debate, arguing that issues like anxiety, personality styles, achievement, or performance are matters that are subject to a vast number of highly mutable psychological and sociological factors. At the same time, it is difficult to simply write off such categories as useless. Ali's proposed intervention offers the potential to test the extent to which learners perform as expected within the psychological categories of extraversion and introversion. Will the outgoing (extraverted) students choose the acting roles while the shy (introverted) students work behind the scenes?

When we let go of the labels, we honor the dynamic nature of LOTE teaching and learning. Within the Vygotskyan tradition of activity theory, Poehner and Lantolf (2005) have introduced Dynamic Assessment (DA) to the language classroom. A key feature of DA is a blurring between teaching and testing. As the authors state, DA "should have the expressed goal of modifying learner performance during the assessment itself" (p. 235). This "future-in-the-making" (p. 237) "assessment-by-teaching" (p. 242) framework has a lot in common with Dynamic Systems Theory since it respects the connection between context and cognition. Opportunities may be "unanticipated" and the teacher has to be acutely attuned to, and make adjustments according to, the evidence he or she is getting from students about what they can do and what they could do with assistance, as evidenced in Schmatz's "think aloud" interaction with her students or Ali's "short three" intervention. Unlike formative assessment, DA is systematic, intensive, centered on long-term developmental goals but attuned to the actual level of development, as revealed in classroom interactions and interventions. DA stands in contrast to the pervasive "deficit model" of the LOTE learner, which, as White points out, still predominates in mainstream LOTE research and pedagogy. Rather than dwelling on what the learner has failed to do, the emphasis switches to dynamic teacher-student dialogue on what they can do and what

they could do with the optimal amount of mediation. Silveri's commentary reframes the conception of our students as incompetent LOTE speakers around a more empowering perspective: "Students increasingly come to us from different cultures, speak different languages and, of course, have different experiences in their homes. As a consequence, they possess a wider range of diverse abilities and talents" (p. 1).

Her recommendations emphasize open negotiation of the classroom experience. Similarly, DA depends on a reframing of lessons in a way that is open and responsive to what "we are encountering at [that] moment" (p. 3). To improve our performance as LOTE teachers, she reminds us that the best resource material has been right in front of us, we just need to stretch our senses and, as she puts it, see with "new eyes." Add to that insight Sabbatino's reminder regarding our students' technological literacies, we can replace the deficit model of the LOTE learner with a portrait of "multicompetence," as Cook (1991) described it. Silveri demonstrates how the competencies of LOTE learners do not have to be mired in their limited capacity to communicate effectively in L2. Instead, she found a variety of tools and strategies to recruit their active participation in the activity structure of her Spanish classroom.

In summing up this discussion of literacies and learners, the latest research and the articles contained in this volume point to a deep *connectedness* in LOTE teaching and learning. They collectively remind us not to let labels undermine that dynamic and "sublime symphony" that is the LOTE classroom, that nexus of teachers and learners, communities, families and schools, texts and cultures, present attitudes, and capacities and those yet to be developed.

So, pack a nice picnic, grab some sand pails and sunscreen. Hold fast to the rollbar; this Wrangler is revved up and ready to get back to the beach!

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*At this writing, we do not yet have access to Robert Peckham's keynote address, which we understand will be submitted with this volume. We truly appreciate this important contribution to the "literacy" dimension of this year's annual meeting and regret that it will not be weaved into this introduction.