Black, White, and Rainbow [of Desire]: the colour of race-talk of pre-service world language educators in Boalian theatre workshops

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This article examines how Boalian Theatre of the Oppressed exercises helped instructors and pre-service teachers navigate the consequences of a forced-labor, racialized discourses in a pre-service world language teacher education classroom. Applying a critical and performative approach, we analyse the mostly White student-actors’ varying representations of a “White teacher’s” use of the term “hoodlum” for classroom management and the resulting communication breakdown that occurred between the teacher and a “Black parent.” Findings indicate that rehearsing pre-service teachers’ classroom struggles helped to move the group away from monochromatic perceptions of White/Black, Teacher/Parent interactions to a polychromic view of interlocutors’ multiple histories and investments. This study has implications for revitalizing the place of world language education in K-12 education, extending the acquisition of second language verbs and nouns to incorporate connections between language, culture, history, and power.

Keywords: foreign language education; student teachers; race; critical pedagogy; performance-based focus groups; Augusto Boal

Introduction

World language educators (WLE, often referred to as “Foreign Language Educators” [FLE] in US schools) can play a key role in how US students perceive the beliefs, values, and practices of non-English language speakers around the world, in turn informing students’ understandings of US English as a linguistic and cultural entity. K-16 world language courses, then, seem the ideal space to address difference, yet Kubota, Austin, and Saito-Abbot (2003) claim that much of the cultural work in WLE classrooms is an “apolitical appreciation and celebration of foreign culture” rather than a critical exploration of issues of diversity (p. 22). That is, the “US preoccupation with attempting to ‘sanitize’ the classroom from controversial issues” (Osborn, 2006, p. 28) effectively limits students’ access to larger issues in the target cultures, including race, religion, and sexuality.

We agree with Barone and Eisner (2012) that arts-based pedagogy and research promote “a level of dislocation, disturbance, disruptiveness, [and] disequilibrium that renders it sufficiently – even highly – useful, and therefore, in this unusual sense of the word, truthful” (p. 16). This article discusses the process and outcomes of applying a critical and performative approach to teacher education (Cahmann-Taylor & Souto-Manning, 2010;
Cahnnam-Taylor, Wooten, Souto-Manning, & Dice, 2009) that allowed us to ask as teacher educators and researchers to explore in one case the unanswerable complexities of US race relations that we hope provides useful implications for language education and pre-service teacher education at large. Specifically, we focus on applications of Augusto Boal’s Forum Theatre (1979) and Rainbow of Desire (1995) exercises to examine how US configurations of race impacted a pre-service Spanish teacher’s instructional experience, the state of mental fallout, and how fellow student teachers in a capstone course responded. Boal’s theatrical exercises served as critical, reflective, and embodied tools for communicating about race and communications between home and school. In this article, we analyse a case where a self-identified White student teacher, “Stacy” (all names are pseudonyms), described an African American parent as antagonistic. We discuss the student-actors’ varying representations of the “White teacher” and “Black parent” roles and the breakdown of stereotypical Black–White communication. Boalian theatre techniques were useful to both our teacher education pedagogy as well as our empirical approach to research in teacher education, allowing us to interrogate the risks and responsibilities of addressing race in WLE.

“It’s a foreign language class”: critical considerations in WLE

From our standpoint as teacher educators (who self-identify as middle class White women, amongst other subject positions) committed to social justice, we believe WLE can and should serve to promote “understanding and collaboration across racial, ethnic and cultural differences” (Kabota & Austin, 2007, pp. 81–82). We recognize, however, that how popular conceptions of the terms “foreign” and “language” play out in classrooms often prevents students (and teachers) from developing such critical linguistic and cultural awareness.

Kabota et al. (2003) surveyed nearly 250 university students enrolled in courses in Japanese, Spanish, and Swahili, asking students, “Does foreign language learning invite you to reflect on issues of race, gender, class and social justice? Why or why not?” (pp. 16–17). The researchers found that beginning students were more likely to view language learning as its own end rather than as an opportunity to consider sociopolitical issues. One student in the study explained this attitude through tonal emphasis, expressed in capital letters: “It’s a foreign LANGUAGE class!” (p. 20). This student’s emphasis on the “language” illustrates a common American misconception that acquiring languages other than English involves mostly, if not exclusively, the discrete parts of language and treats Spanish, French, Chinese and so on as an object which is acted upon, an entity to be scrutinized, analyzed, and broken down into its smallest components (Tedick & Walker, 1994, p. 305). Students are expected to memorize vocabulary and conjugate verbs prescribed in textbooks in order to string words together to describe what they are wearing, what they like to eat, or where they live, for example. There is rarely any discussion in the classroom of the underlying sociopolitical conditions that make what they are wearing, what they like to eat, or where they live possible for them and impossible for others here in the United States and abroad. Students in these classrooms are missing “the ways in which language is used to convey and protect social status, as well as how it can be used to oppress and denigrate both individuals and groups” (Reagan & Osborn, 2002, p. 51) when they do not consider language as having power in its social context.

Sticking to the safety of discrete language instruction and the culture-lite trinity of “food, fun, and fiestas” (Herman, 2007, p. 126) allows teachers and students to sidestep the risks of considering their own positionality in relation to social injustices. As Tedick and Walker (1994) provocatively asserted, “It is easier to deal with Oktoberfest in the German classroom than to explore the emergence of xenophobia among youth in Germany and contrast and compare this emergence to parallel patterns here in the United States” (p. 209). While one could read this criticism as being related to linguistic expression (i.e., students will have less difficulty linguistically with Oktoberfest than racism), Tedick and Walker overtly took aim at the sanitization of controversial topics from the WL curriculum, suggesting that the focus on stereotypical cultural products, practices, and perspectives reinforces exoticism as well as limits students’ understanding of diversity in the cultures under study. In other words, speakers of the language under study remain “foreign” when students do not critically examine the underlying conditions of the speakers’ realities and possible (uncomfortable) connections students may share with them.

The divorce between language and culture in WLE, the sanitization of controversial topics from the curriculum, and the reinforced distance between the learner and speakers of the language under study have succeeded in making language study in the United States appear largely irrelevant, even reifying the very inequalities we believe WLE sought for social justice could help redress. These shortcomings—reiterated by the critical WLW scholars mentioned previously and others including Guilmier (2002) and Leeman (2005) — are becoming even more pronounced as the school population becomes more diverse. Simply stated, we cannot continue to teach languages as we have. Instead, we need a critical approach to language education and language teacher education that “take[s] the stance that all claims about knowledge regarding language, culture, pedagogical practices, and social relationships can be problematic” while “envisio[ning] the creation of a more just society by transforming unequal relations of power” (Kabota & Austin, 2007, pp. 75–76).

While examples of critical approaches are numerous in teaching English Language Learners and/or heritage language learners in US contexts (García, 2009, 2012; Potowski, 2007; Valdes, 2010) and international TESOL contexts (Canagarajah, 1993; Hammonds, 2006; Pennycook, 2007), there are fewer examples of what critical WLE looks like in the US classroom. One exception is Goulah’s (2007, 2011) work on transformative second and foreign language learning, which he defined as focusing on “cosmology, ecological selfhood, quality of life, and spirituality in interlocking structures of race, class, gender, and power in the context of standards-based world language and culture learning” (2011, p. 34). Working with US high school students in an introductory Japanese course, Goulah described how the use of the popular anime film Princess Mononoke became a lens that allowed students to critically examine the interstices of environmentalism (including themes of man vs. nature) and spirituality in Japan. Although the students initially bristled at the seeming connection between spirituality and religion (often deemed taboo in US public schools), the students in his class — including one who had made overt racist comments previous to the unit of instruction — were able to articulate their own understandings (as opposed to prescribed views) of Japan in relation to the environment and spirituality; examine their own cultures through new knowledge of experience with the target culture; and describe their own spirituality and desire to be agents of change in relation to their and others’ interactions with the environment.

Fostering language students’ abilities to reflect on the enabling conditions and the material effects of language and culture on themselves and others, as seen in Goulah’s work, begins with how we prepare language teachers who themselves may not consider the ideological implications of their own language use. While some research traditionalists
Figure 1: Error propagation model (Reiman and Calma, August 2002) of the process chain.

1. Identify the process chain.
2. Analyze each step.
3. Calculate the error propagation.
4. Implement corrective actions.

Process Chain

1. Identification
2. Analysis
3. Calculation
4. Implementation