Special Issue: Reframing the Knowledge-Base of Language Teacher Education

Reframing How (Part One)—English Language Teaching

**Title: Reframing the Space Between: Teachers and Learners in Context**

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**Abstract (75 words)**

New audiences, new theoretical understandings of cognitive development and teaching, and the moral imperative to reach all learners and teachers require reframing how we assess our effectiveness in ELT. In this paper, I presented four areas of LTE that require reframing: (a) Who we prepare (b) with what content (c) to competently participate in personal *and* social change, (d) by making the space between teacher and students active with responsive assistance that improves learner outcomes.

**Bio (47 words)**

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Introduction

My experience in PK-12 language teacher education (LTE) started as the debate on the role of Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) in a teaching profession began (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Tarone & Allwright, 2005). At the time, SLA research was theoretically robust (Ellis, 1994). Kumaravadivelu (1994) had declared us “post-method” and called for teachers, teaching, and teacher education to become central in the LTE enterprise. English language teaching (ELT) was creating its own PK-12 specialist knowledge base. Techniques and methods were replaced by research-derived generalizations (Larsen-Freeman, 1991), principles (Brown, 1994), and later English as a Second Language (ESL) standards (TESOL, 1997) and protocols to support teachers’ decision making (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2000). New PK-12 scholarship articulated the state of ESL knowledge (August & Hakuta, 1997) and what teachers needed to know about language (Adger, Snow, & Christian, 2002).

Parallel to these developments, Vygotsky’s (1978; 1997) sociocultural theory of learning was becoming more prevalent in western psychology and education (e.g., Rogoff, 1990; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Wells, 1999) as well as language education (e.g., Lantolf, 2000; Moll, 2001). By 2006, Johnson identified this shift in LTE as the “sociocultural turn” (p. 237) inviting more “situated, social, and distributed views of human cognition” (p. 236). Indeed, Freeman and Johnson (1998) had set the stage for a “campaign of radical change” (Tarone & Allwright, 2005, p. 10).

This was the starting point for my own exploration of what it meant to be in LTE preparing PK-12 teachers and teacher educators for multilingual/multicultural (MLMC) learners. With four U.S. Department of Education grants (2002, 2005, 2007, & 2011), I have used university course work, multimedia product development, and job-embedded coaching to improve teaching practices (e.g., Harris, Pinnegar, & Teemant, 2005; Teemant, 2005, 2014; Teemant, Leland, & Berghoff, 2014; Teemant, Smith, Pinnegar, & Egan, 2005; Teemant, Wink, & Tyra, 2011). My goal has been to develop “new systems, procedures, or routines predicated on research findings that are geared toward developing functional practices” (Petronio, 2007, p. 215) that improve educational equity for MLMC students. Overtime, my vision for PK-12 ELT and LTE has become grounded in critical sociocultural theory and practices (e.g., Freire, 1994; Teemant, et al., 2014; Tharp, 2012; Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000).

In this paper, I present four areas of the LTE knowledge base that require reframing based on my own cycles of action and reflection—praxis (Freire, 1994)—in asking “How can I improve my practice with teachers in light of MLMC learners?” These areas for reframing first emerged in my practice as “living contradictions” (Whitehead, 1989); that is, where I observed the negation of my own values, causing me to reflect, reframe, and act anew. As Lakoff (2014) argues, reframing should indeed “shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions” (p. xv).

The “Who” Should Matter in Apportioning Expectations

In LTE we must begin by acknowledging the dramatic shift in who we are preparing to teach what to whom where. Across the last twenty years, three PK-12 U.S. trends have remained
constant. First, there has been an ongoing and dramatic growth of MLMC learners in public schools, which is now at 9.3% (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Second, the teaching force—largely white, female, monolingual, and middle class—remains inadequately prepared to meet the needs of MLMC learners (e.g., Faltis & Valdés, 2016; Friedman, 2015), which should always be seen as our own inadequacy no matter how uncomfortable that idea is. Third, the pattern of underachievement among MLMC students has remained persistent (Gándara, 2013). These trends, in turn, have exponentially expanded the PK-12 language teacher educator’s scope of responsibility to include preparing both specialists and non-specialists (i.e., general education teachers) to teach MLMC students.

The specialist and non-specialist roles differ widely in practice. The language specialist, who serves as a teacher or aide, may or may not have any formal qualifications. They self-select into teaching MLMC students and typically pull out or push in to teach English language development (ELD) lessons to small groups of students at the novice levels of English proficiency. These lessons are loosely, if at all, connected to the “mainstream” curriculum. Saunders, Goldenberg, and Marcelletti (2013) acknowledge that “ELD instruction has been driven mostly by theory. The result is a large body of accepted practices that are not adequately supported by research” (p. 13); however, they conclude that “providing ELD instruction, in some form, is more beneficial than not providing it” (p. 15).

On the other hand, the non-specialist in the general education classroom typically teaches students at all levels of English proficiency, becoming a defacto language teacher with no or limited professional preparation. By earning ESL certification, such a teacher may be asked to shelter the teaching of content using instructional supports for students at intermediate proficiency levels. As Saunders et al. (2013) observe, sheltered instruction has similarly produced “virtually no data to suggest that sheltered instruction or any of these modifications and supports help ELs [English learners] keep up with non-ELs or help close the achievement gap between them” (p. 7).

Preparing specialists is the easy part of LTE: Specialists mirror back the teacher educator’s own interests, motivations, and commitments. The challenge for LTE is to avoid a deficit orientation toward defacto teachers who unwittingly and/or unwillingly come to the task of language teaching. It is these non-specialists who have forced me to acknowledge the boundaries of my own preparation as well as the field of LTE. I have had to work in that uncomfortable space of using my own “emerging understandings” to design professional learning for non-specialist teachers. Every domain and process of LTE can be improved by interrogating the boundaries and possibilities of our own knowledge, practices, assumptions, values, and beliefs in the face of new learners (Scarino, 2005).

In truth, we need more teachers—not fewer—to become qualified to teach MLMC students. These specialist and non-specialist roles have not adequately been taken into account in the LTE knowledge base. The range of experiences, histories, contexts, circumstances, preparation, content, and practices—what Freeman and Johnson (1998) describe as the “backdrop of teachers’ professional lives” (p. 405)—remain relevant albeit it different for the specialist and non-specialist. They should not be given a one-size-fits-all curriculum, credential program, or high-stakes test for certification. LTE must decide how the knowledge, skills, and dispositions
for “language teaching” should be apportioned to each group. Who gets how much of what knowledge for which targeted purposes under what conditions to improve the educational outcomes for MLMC students? How will different roles be recognized in credentialing? These questions need to be interrogated theoretically, practically, and most importantly empirically in LTE precisely because non-specialists are fundamentally different in identity, content, roles, and contexts from specialists.

The (In)Significance of Language Knowledge

Twenty years ago, I thought language knowledge and SLA processes—my expertise—were what teachers needed to know to teach MLMC learners. There has been an avalanche of PK-12 ELT scholarship focused on defining the specialized disciplinary language and discourse knowledge teachers need for teaching (e.g., Adger, et al., 2002; Bunch, 2013; Turkan, de Oliveira, Lee, & Phelps, 2014; WIDA, 2012). However, as Faltis and Valdés (2016) acknowledge, “Different applied linguists and language educators draw from often radically dissimilar definitions of language, given their particular theoretical orientations and analytical purposes” (p. 567). Bunch (2013) concedes such teacher knowledge of language rarely connects to student outcomes.

While language knowledge is certainly valuable in its own right, Tett (2015) warns that expertise can also create unproductive silos, fragmentation, and tunnel vision. Early on, I learned language knowledge, especially for non-specialists, was the wrong starting point for teacher learning. I believe general and disciplinary language knowledge must become codified into the textbooks and resources teachers use to become actionable in every day practice. However, I also now understand that no matter how eloquent knowledge of language becomes in theory, it will not go far enough nor be radical enough in practice to result in equity for MLMC learners.

In my LTE practice, I have been forced to confront the significance and insignificance of language. I learned that PK-12 students do not regularly have sustained or meaningful opportunities to read, write, or talk in school. Teaching was typically telling, and learning was predominately unassisted. I learned that getting teachers to write language objectives was meaningless if they did not also know how to create the pedagogical and relational conditions for language use and learning in the classroom. Without small group participant structures, classroom management skills, and meaningful and collaborative learning activities and projects, MLMC students would not develop the language, content, or relationships needed to learn.

It became untenable for me to ignore the “radical reconstruction of teaching and learning” that was demanded by the political context of schooling (Salazar, 2013, p. 126). I changed my approach. Teachers were deeply interested in promoting learning, so I made learning and learners, rather than language, my starting point. I turned to critical pedagogy (Freire, 1994) and sociocultural pedagogy (Tharp et al., 2000) to radically reframe pedagogical practices to address the prejudice, lack of inclusivity, teaching-as-telling, and unassisted learning MLMC students faced each day. Figure 1 lists the principles of learning I used called the Six Standards for Effective Pedagogy (Teemant et al., 2014; Tharp et al., 2000). These principles are: Collaboration (Joint Productive Activity), language production (Language and Literacy Development), co-construction of knowledge (Contextualization), higher order thinking (Challenging Activities), dialogic learning (Instructional Conversations), and civic engagement.
My research showed that teachers greatly improve the likelihood of students’ language use and learning when activities integrate use of at least three of these principles (e.g., Teemant & Hausman, 2013; Teemant, Hausman, & Tyra, 2017).

I have learned as teachers come to understand and experience that thinking, language, and emotion cannot be separated in learning, they are more open to focusing on language, becoming culturally responsive, and assisting students in the process of learning. They move beyond their initial schema of “just good teaching” (de Jong and Harper, 2005, p. 102) to recognize the specialized knowledge needed for teaching MLMC students. By focusing on learning in an inclusive community first, I avoid non-specialist resistance to language issues; disrupt the status quo of recitation as teaching; and create the conditions for (language) learning. Using what van Lier and Walqui (2012) call “language as action,” I find teachers benefit from understanding language use as “part of larger systems of meaning making” rather than an “autonomous system” (p. 5). The significance of language knowledge for ELT rests in its becoming actionable as a larger vision of critical and sociocultural pedagogical practices that affirm MLMC students’ identities while teaching to high expectations.

Competent Participation in Change Processes

Overtime, I have come to understand that LTE must explicitly take up the business of influencing institutional and social change, moving beyond our collective comfort zone of White, middle-class, predominately female socialization. The evidence for this need comes from the fact that public schools are a microcosm of society as a whole. MLMC students, among many historically marginalized populations, are confronted with attitudes of “intolerance, bigotry, and assimilation” that dehumanize them, their families, and communities (Salazar, 2013, p. 122). They are increasingly caught in a pattern of “hypersegregation” (Martinez, Morales, & Aldana, 2017, p. 496) in schools that lead to greater social and educational inequities.

Educators do not think of themselves or their students as in need of emancipation from a system that is not fully functional. Teachers, in general, fail to appreciate the fact that education is, in and of itself, a political act. Teachers have been socialized to be dependable, creative, supportive of authority, and long-suffering as they wait for another reform effort or media attack to pass. As Salazar (2013) observes, educators tend to accept the goal of “cultural replacement and assimilation into mainstream values and practice,” and MLMC students’ “struggles are often attributed to their culture, language, and home environment” (p. 122). Questioning this status quo, reflecting on it from multiple perspectives, and then taking action to change dehumanizing and psychologically damaging educational policies, practices, and programs—big or small—are mindsets that need to be intentionally cultivated in teacher educators, teachers and leaders, and ultimately in students themselves. Alim and Paris (2017) argue that such a “critical, emancipatory vision of schooling” would reframe “the object of critique from our children to oppressive systems” (p. 3). The valuing of personal change in LTE should never sacrifice the more important commitment of equipping teachers to confront cultural scripts, contribute to meaningful school reform, and advocate for MLMC learners. Teachers and students need to be
socialized for active citizenship in a democracy (Zyngier, 2012), with a clear focus on “prioritizing values such as equality, freedom, and social justice” (Crookes, 2015, p. 486).

Competent participation in creating social and institutional change for equity—in the classroom, school, and society—is a neglected competency in teacher preparation. Tharp (2012) described this unheralded aspect of our work as Delta Theory. The proposition of Delta Theory is that “influence and change operate primarily, indeed almost exclusively, within and through psychosocial systems—that is, affiliated persons organized into systems that share values, purpose, and activity” (p. 5). Tharp argued that shared values and understandings—or intersubjectivity—around inequities is only possible when people from dissimilar linguistic, cultural, educational, historical, economic, and political backgrounds engage in collaborative dialogue and activity with a shared purpose. Freire (1994) observed that shared values emerge “in fellowship and solidarity” (p. 66) where participants humanize each other, allowing themselves to be “in the process of becoming—an unfinished, uncompleted being in and with a likewise unfinished reality” (p. 64). Koleski, Thorius, and Smith (2014) argue that such socialization “must be framed as an expansive learning endeavor in which inclusivity and cultural responsivity are core principles against which success is measured” (p. 20). Using this standard, LTE should make visible in its knowledge base, and act upon in practice, a commitment to equipping a new generation of teachers for competent participation in social change.

**The Space Between**

Reflecting on 50 years of educational reform, Cuban (2013) observed, “The what of teaching has, indeed changed, but when it comes to the how—the pedagogy—few major changes have occurred” (p. 7). Educators remain entrenched in a teacher-centered, transmission-oriented pedagogy. Vygotsky (1997) envisioned the interactional space between the teacher and students as an active and bi-directional learning relationship. Tharp (2006) explained that “the crucial element of the classroom” is “the organization of instructional activity and the patterns of teacher and student relationships” (p. 6).

In reframing ELT, the LTE knowledge base must take into account this interactional space between teachers and students, which is part dynamic process, activity (not merely maturation), and “contextualized interaction mediated by language” (Stentsenko & Arievitch, 1997, p. 161). I concur with Tarone and Allwright (2005) that the MLMC learners themselves are an essential addition to the knowledge base for LTE; however, I do not envision this as two separate domains: Teachers and students. My longitudinal research in classrooms has convinced me that only an emphasis on the space between teachers and students will lead to radical pedagogical and cultural change in process, activity, and interaction. I have found Freeman’s and Johnson’s (2005) argument for “a more sophisticated and sensitive way of conceptualizing this relationship” (p. 74) of influence central to advancing PK-12 teacher development and student outcomes.

In my own work, I have operationalized the space between teacher and students with the Six Standards as being collaborative, language rich, contextualized, cognitively challenging, dialogic, and democratic (Teemant et al., 2014). Tharp (2012, Chapter 4) further identified eight
well-established micro-level “means of influence” teachers use to mediate learning when interacting with students. These include: Use of task-structuring, propping/nudging, modeling, contingency management (e.g., rewards), instructing, questioning, cognitive structuring, and feeding-back against a standard. Tharp lamented, however, “how little these” means of influence are used to assist students to learn.

I offer several observations to bolster this emphasis on the space between related to learning from my research on instructional coaching to use of the Six Standards (e.g., Teemant, 2014, Teemant, Cen, & Wilson, 2014; Teemant & Hausman, 2013; Teemant, Hausman, & Kiganwa, 2016; Teemant, Hausman, & Tyra, 2017; Teemant et al., 2014; Teemant et al., 2013; Teemant, Wink, & Tyra, 2011). First, prior to Six Standards professional development, PK-12 teachers and teacher educators alike use predominately whole-class teaching with brief pair-share student activities, where they monitored behavior, observed or audited learning, but do not assist students to learn. Second, at the end of instructional coaching, PK-12 teachers (one year) and university faculty (one semester) demonstrate significant and positive use of assisted learning practices in dialogue with small groups of students. Third, one year after the end of coaching, teachers sustain use of critical sociocultural practices at one level lower than full fidelity (level 3 on a scale from 0 to 4), demonstrating that teachers’ fallback position is to observe but not assist learning. Fourth, when pre-service student teachers have university faculty and clinical placement mentors who have been coached in Six Standards pedagogy, student teachers enact critical sociocultural practices with fidelity: They assist students to learn. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, when the space between teacher and students is active, it significantly increases academic achievement and English proficiency.

My experience has shown me that learning to implement critical sociocultural practices, as represented by the Six Standards pedagogy, constitutes radical change for educators. Teachers and teacher educators can theoretically understand the importance assisting students within the zone of proximal development (ZPD) while still failing to know how to organize and manage small group participant structures that make assisted and dialogic learning possible. Conversely, it is also possible, as Tarone and Allwright (2005) encourage, to know your students—the who, what, and why of their academic and personal lives—without knowing how to use that knowledge to assist students to learn. Johnson and Golombek (2016) have argued for responsive mediation to become an important tool in LTE. Given our history of unassisted learning in the U.S., teacher educators will need to explicitly model, teach, and allow teachers to experience such mediation. Supporting teachers to mediate responsively in their own practice takes time and intentional support from more knowledgeable others, which is uncommon in PK-12 and university settings. Without a practice-rich focus on the space between teacher and students, the status quo of unassisted learning will continue.

**Conclusion**

New audiences, new theoretical understandings of cognitive development and teaching, and the moral imperative to reach all learners and teachers require reframing how we assess our effectiveness in ELT. In this paper, I presented four areas of LTE that require reframing: (a) Who we prepare (b) with what content (c) to competently participate in personal and social
change, (d) by making the space between teacher and students active with responsive assistance that improves learner outcomes.

My longitudinal engagement with PK-12 teachers and university faculty has led to bi-directional, corrective, humbling, and rewarding learning experiences. As I recognized blind spots, living contradictions, and the limits of my LTE preparation in action, I have had to act my way into greater consciousness and development. While my learning is still in progress, I have learned that the preparation of non-specialists in language requires reframing how much of what knowledge we apportion to them. We must guard against tunnel vision—or the comfort of our own expertise—that may unintentionally free us from responsibility to address the multidimensional needs of teachers and their MLMC students in context. Language is only one dimension of need, and it becomes irrelevant when not tethered to a clear vision for creating the pedagogical conditions for meaningful and authentic language learning.

For ELT to improve, radical change is needed: The LTE knowledge base should reflect commitment to the improvement of teaching and social change as foundational domains of practice. Future research must establish the empirical importance of various types of teacher knowledge in advancing MLMC students learning outcomes. Because language teacher educators often offer significant amounts of course work beyond the initial teaching license, we are uniquely positioned to empirically understand how to sequence teacher learning—professional learning progressions so to speak—so teachers become increasingly sophisticated in understanding the teacher-student relationship in learning, unpacking the values, cultural contexts, practices, and language demands of academic work needed to be successful with MLMC students. I agree with Hiebert and Morris (2012) that “foregrounding the study and improvement of teaching, with teacher learning treated as a natural consequence, is worth more serious consideration than it currently receives” (p. 384).

References


Figure 1

The Six Standards for Effective Pedagogy

STANDARDS FOR Effective Pedagogy

STANDARD 1 Joint Productive Activity (JPA) Teacher and Students Producing Together
Facilitate learning through joint productive activity among teacher and students.

Enacting Level: The teacher and a small group of students collaborate on a shared product.

STANDARD 2 Language & Literacy Development (LLD)
Developing Language and Literacy Across the Curriculum
Develop competence in the language and literacy of instruction across the curriculum.

Enacting Level: The teacher provides structured opportunities for students to engage in sustained reading, writing, or speaking activities; and assists academic language use or literacy development by questioning, rephrasing, or modeling.

STANDARD 3 Contextualization (CTX)
Making Meaning: Connecting School to Students’ Lives
Connect teaching and curriculum to experiences and skills of students’ home and community.

Enacting Level: The teacher integrates the new activity/information with what students already know from home, school, or community.

STANDARD 4 Challenging Activities (CA) Teaching Complex Thinking
Challenge students toward cognitive complexity.

Enacting Level: The teacher designs and enacts challenging activities with clear standards and performance feedback, and assists the development of more complex thinking.

STANDARD 5 Instructional Conversation (IC) Teaching Through Conversation
Engage students through dialogue, especially the Instructional Conversation.

Enacting Level: The teacher has a planned, goal-directed conversation with a small group of students on an academic topic; elicits student talk by questioning, listening, and responding to assess and assist student understanding; and inquires about students’ views, judgments, or rationales. Student talk occurs at higher rates than teacher talk.

STANDARD 6 Critical Stance (CS) Teaching to Transform Inequities
Empower students to transform society’s inequities through democracy and civic engagement.

Enacting Level: The teacher consciously engages learners in interrogating conventional wisdom and practices, reflecting upon ramifications, and seeking actively to transform inequities within their scope of influence in the classroom and larger community.