Book Review

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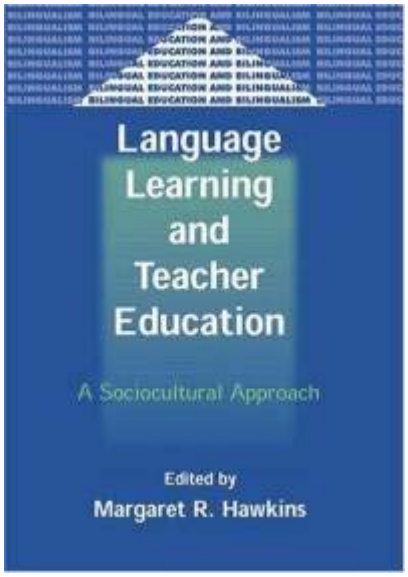
Language Learning and Teacher Education: A Sociocultural Approach, edited by Margaret Hawkins. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2004, pp. vii + 197, ISBN 1-85359-763-5.



This book is a qualitative look at instructional and meta-instructional cases where pedagogical decisions revolving around modality choices are viewed in terms of social grammars, what Gee calls *Discourses*. Multimodal learning and social discourses are not fads; they are components of language education we must learn to reckon with if we are to empower communicative learners. The issues that these cases bring up are as prominent today as they were when the book was first published in 2004. More recent research has not replaced the issues, just dealt with progressively more complexity as new media arrive on the scene (Kress, 2010). Hawkins begins, "the role of the teacher [is] as a catalyst to ensure equal educational access and promote social change" (p. 5). This is more assumed than argued; ambitious and socially conscious statements pepper the rest of the book, providing a rational for some curricular decisions. However, what the book really sets out to do is grapple with our role in teaching, not teaching, or teaching versions of social discourses with an expanded option of tools including narratives, computer-mediated communication (CMC) and student-made visuals. This book accomplishes what it sets out to do; namely, provide examples of different discourses at play, and

cases where multimodal approaches have been harnessed to provide fora for expression.

The seven chapters of the book are organized into five parts, each part containing one theme. In Chapter 1, Gee lays the ground for the rest of the book by giving a number of examples explicating *Social Discourse* as language distinct from our less socially informed definitions of what we study when we study language. The book hinges on Gee's distinctions; one cannot appreciate the perspectives in subsequent chapters without reading Chapter 1. For Gee, socially uninformed views of grammar and syntax challenge for language educators because just grammar and vocabulary do not add up to language proficiency. Gee gives examples such as a teenager who recites the same opinion in different terms to her friends and to her parents, making the grammar of social discourses very clear. This is the logical expansion of communicative language teaching (CLT), getting at the heart of why communicative proficiency does not equal the grammar and syntax as stated in our textbooks (Hymes, 1972).

Gee does not ignore the elephant in the room: Does creating an environment not subservient to the dominant groups' discourse styles do more harm than good if the world outside the classroom still punishes those without dominant discourse proficiency? The rest of the text addresses this question with examples of approaches, and reflections on attempts that did, and did not, play out as authors had expected. Avoiding "reinforce[ing] cultural models that will help students fail" (p. 27) is a theme throughout the book. For example, in Chapter 5, Miller implies that teachers accustomed to making sense of L2 constructions quickly grasp students' intended meanings, but society at large is unlikely to be very understanding. Miller points out that teachers can be too coddling for students who must function in a less linguistically tolerant world. Freeman (Chapter 7) partially resolves the issue in his argument that the content we teach is the social discourse of the groups in power, and the way to bridge that is more sensitive and enlightened teacher education.

The strengths of the book are in the precedent the examples of pedagogical interventions bring to a discussion of social discourse. A hidden gem in Chapter 5 has to be the SLA concepts' chart on page 115, delineating a shift into a Discourse model understanding of SLA. On the whole, these examples and discussions of vignettes make a strong case that, on the syllabus or not, students learn quickly that student/teacher talk is quite different from student/student talk. What learners do not have are outlets for their own expressions and access to the clear, intelligible explanations of the dominant group's social grammars. The content of learning is only partially contained in the curricula we recognize and test. A curious option was presented in chapter 3, which brings up a paradox within the whole book. Jerri Willett and his student coauthor attempted to remove the dominant discourse altogether, and ended up in a kind of reverse observer's paradox. Removing the dominant discourse helps little when, in the end, the terms of evaluation *are* the dominant discourse. When the teacher's voice goes unheard, important discourses

go unheard. As with examples in other chapters, readers may conclude that recognizing the dominant discourse is helpful, but disposing of it is futile.

Where this book fails is in the discussions of multimodality. In a book that discusses multimodal approaches to accessing the discourses learners are most comfortable in, there are no figures, pictures, or examples of student work. I admit, some of the multimodal approaches are narrative and hard to capture without multimedia. While hardly as performance-focused as something like the Rassias Method (Johnston, 1983; Oller, 1993), pictures would really help readers see the methods at work. Stein (Chapter 2) and Beynon (Chapter 6) draw on similar alternative modalities without the help of visuals that would make the text an asset for practitioners. Stein attempts to grant "exchange value" to students' cultural resources by approaching language instruction through "multiple semiotic modes," namely, performed narrative (acting), and taking photographs. The discussion would gain much from a closer look at those pictures and some strategies for teachers to really put them to use.

Margaret Hawkins' examination of bulletin board class discussions exemplifies common weaknesses among the other chapters. She takes a closer look at examples of real learner discourse, but stops short of actually proposing how one might go about teaching the more effective discourses in a mediated setting. She gives up when she concludes these discourses are something we quickly pick up on, but rarely consciously recognize. When many students have excellent language skills, but lack the discourse skills needed to build rapport in mediated environments, why have there been so few attempts to teach these discourses online (Howard, 2011)? This chapter, as well as a number of the others, fails to acknowledge the extreme amount of academic freedom inherent in the different approaches. These approaches identify explorative practices only a tenured faculty member could get away with. Not all of us can turn our classrooms into workshops, include free-flowing narratives, or include open discussions in CMC spaces in an attempt to teach discourses.

This is why language educators should own, or at least read, this text. It is a link between the arguments for communicative language teaching (Canale & Swain, 1980) and multimodal literacies (Kress, Jewitt, Ogborn & Tsatsarelis, 2001; Kress, 2010). Particularly the first chapter provides students of language pedagogy with a concise argument for just why it is that these new literacies are important components of language teaching. It is not an easy step for a language teacher to come to terms with the concept that they are not teaching how to conjugate verbs in language *x*, but rather how to create an educated discussant in culture *y*. It is not the wrong tense that will hinder the learners' success; it's saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. This book ties the ideas of multimodal literacy to teaching in a world where correct answers are not provided on a rubric, and the punishment for wrong answers is intangible and severe.

References

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