

The political and the ethical in language teaching: A rejoinder to 'Between professionalism and political engagement in foreign language teaching practice'

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1 Introduction

Having known Claire Kramersch for many years I find it odd to refer to her as 'Kramersch', and since this is an invitation to write a 'comment' I would prefer to refer to 'Claire'; but although this is a personal comment, perhaps that is too informal and so I will use 'CK'. Academic writing conventions are not always comfortable.

As a 'comment' and not a 'review', I have chosen to juxtapose CK's account of 'the political' in language teaching with that of people with whom I have worked. I hope this is not interpreted as egocentrism. In the spirit of comparative education analysis, I am seeking to notice what would otherwise be taken for granted in either position.

My first comment is that CK starts from an empirical problem and builds up a convincing argument of original and stimulating insights, an approach which I have always admired. Perhaps not surprising either, in view of her emphasis for many years on the importance of 'symbolic competence' as part of intercultural competence, CK ends in a position which demonstrates how

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symbolic competence is political. It is with this notion of ‘the political’ that I shall begin, and then move to ‘the ethical’.

2 Interpretations of ‘the political’

CK’s starting point is that ‘FL learners are now interested in understanding the conflicts in parts of the world that speak the language they are learning’ (p. 336). The focus of the experiments of the language teachers CK describes was on ‘conflicts’. They also used the phrase ‘controversial issues’ to analyse their students’ needs before planning their lessons. Students were ‘eager to be able to talk about topics of social and political importance when going abroad’ (p. 343). They and their teachers were interested in declarative knowledge about ‘the political’.

In answer to her own question ‘when is something “political”?’, CK (p. 351) argues that ‘translanguaging and the reflection on the process itself can amount to political engagement and translingual activism’, and that teachers can ‘insert the political into the professional’ (i.e. into professional language teaching purposes and aims – MB) by a discussion of ‘clashes of discourse’ and ‘struggle for symbolic power’. In explaining ‘translingual activism’, CK draws upon Pennycook (2019: 179), who contrasts ‘traditional questions of citizenship or social justice’ with ‘alternative anarchist roots’, and suggests there is a connection between the pursuit of translingual activism and resistance to certain ways of teaching English (e.g. monolingual pedagogies) and ‘taking the struggle to the streets, of maintaining a critical attitude to law and the state’ (Pennycook 2019: 180). He then quotes a call by William Armaline for pedagogical practices to be renewed in the light of the desires and needs of an anarchist society. In a different interpretation of ‘the political’ that I will explain below, students have indeed, in some intercultural citizenship projects, taken to the streets, not in a spirit of anarchy but in a spirit of internationalism which challenges the taken-for-granted and seeks to reform it (Byram 2018). That Pennycook would call this ‘traditional’ does not worry me, whereas a call for students to engage in anarchy would.

What CK has explained has to be understood in the particular FL teaching context described by her, and against the background of the particular status (as ‘non-senate faculty’) of the teachers, a status which seems to constrain their freedom of action, and seems to limit ‘the political’ to changes in ‘the professional’. The context I am writing in is different. Language teachers, and all teachers, are being called upon in policy statements in some European countries to take a role in (national) citizenship education, and I am increasingly invited to discuss what the specific contribution of language teachers can be. On such occasions, I refer to a different interpretation of ‘the political’, which

has been developed over the last decade or so in ‘intercultural citizenship’, and which combines FL teaching with aspects of citizenship education.

To clarify, a brief historical account is necessary. The first step was taken by Peter Doyé (1993), who compared the (West) German tradition of *politische Bildung* (e.g. Gagel 1983) with FL teaching. In *politische Bildung* there are three kinds of ‘orientation’ to be offered across all subjects to children and young people in the course of their general education:

- cognitive orientation: the acquisition of concepts, knowledge and modes of analysis for the understanding of political phenomena;
- evaluative orientation: the explanation and mediation of values and the ability to make political judgements on the basis of these values; and
- action orientation: development of the ability and the readiness for political engagement.

Peter Doyé found these same orientations in the FL classroom, and I took this into my description of intercultural communicative competence (Byram 1997):

- cognitive orientation: the international dimension of the acquisition of knowledge about and understanding of other countries, cultures and societies;
- evaluative orientation: political education leading learners to reflection on social norms, including those of other societies than their own, in order to lead them to a capacity for political judgement; this corresponds to the aims of FLT to lead learners to respect the norms of other societies and to evaluate them in an unprejudiced way; and
- action orientation: both political education and FLT aim to instil in learners a disposition for engagement and interaction with others, in the case of FLT the ‘others’ are usually from another culture and society and the interaction is, psychologically if not sociologically, of a different kind, but it is also an extension of engagement with people in one’s own society.

Up to this point, ‘action orientation’ is a ‘disposition’ which may lead to activity, but not necessarily.

The second step was when I compared FL teaching which had intercultural communicative competence as its aim with a revised and extended concept of *politische Bildung* which had a new emphasis on *Demokratie-Lernen* (Byram 2008). *Demokratie-Lernen* extended the focus from students’ acquiring declarative knowledge about politics to include procedural knowledge acquired through involvement in democratic processes in educational institutions, involving a range of actions from organisation of a classroom to governance of a school (e.g. Himmelmann 2004).

The third step was inspired by the introduction of ‘education for citizenship’ in English schools which, through examples of good practice as well as policy statements, took the acquisition and application of procedural knowledge beyond the boundaries of the school or university. Students become involved in action in their community as part of their education in the here and now, rather than in some undefined time in the future. The disposition becomes a reality.

As in citizenship education, and also in ‘intercultural citizenship’, learners become involved in ‘action in the community’ – this became a catchphrase for teachers and learners alike – and acquire procedural and declarative knowledge through interaction with people in a community who speak the FL and who have their own perspective on societal problems (Byram *et al.* 2017).

In this ‘intercultural citizenship’ interpretation of ‘the political’, procedural knowledge takes precedence over declarative knowledge, but does not replace it. The latter is acquired as procedures are realised and ‘action’ is taken ‘in the community’, but it may not be as systematically planned as is evident in CK’s cases. In some cases ‘action in the community’ is real and students engage in problem solving of social issues in the community in which they live. In other cases, however, the interaction with people speaking the language they are learning remains a fiction within the classroom, and fictional cases of problems to solve in a community may be the only pedagogical option.¹ What is at stake, whether real or fictional, is a ‘problem’ rather than a ‘conflict’, although the problem will usually be ‘controversial’.

‘Is this language teaching?’ is a question often asked. Our answer is that, in teaching methodology terms, there is a transfer into the language classroom of the notion of ‘Content and Language Integrated learning’ or ‘Content-Based Instruction’, which brings increased language competence as students are cognitively challenged (Porto 2018).

So much for the learners. But what about the teachers?

Ethical issues

CK’s teachers are in a particular context and their status is as non-senate faculty (NSF). As such, CK is careful to limit her comments to teachers at colleges and universities in the US.

The dilemma these teachers face is that they are expected to be ‘professional’ and teach, rather than to be ‘tenure track’ and research. As such they are ‘warned against a lack of political objectivity’ (p. 338) and there is an ‘expectation of ethical integrity and objectivity’ (p. 339). However, in reviewing the writings of applied linguists and FL educators, CK concludes that they urge teachers to be ‘more politically engaged’ (my emphasis, since I am not sure that teachers are already deliberately and consciously politically engaged). The question is whether teachers who are NSF can be so.

CK's conclusion is that the methods used did not lead to discussion of how particular words in an FL are embedded in larger discourses which would have allowed understanding of their 'political symbolic significance'. Yet CK also urges that we find ways of doing this even with students at lower levels of language learning.

All this takes place, as said above, within the exhortation from universities that NSF should be professional and maintain objectivity, but also within the context that they are teachers not researchers, having 'an educational, not a scholarly mission' (p. 349). Teachers of intercultural citizenship in schools, as opposed to higher education, are in a similar position with respect to research and scholarship, although in practice some have been very happy to publish. These teachers, however, have not included methods of teaching the 'translingual activism' CK seeks in the work of her teachers. They could learn about this and make it a conscious element of teaching intercultural citizenship,² but they also face and are conscious of a different kind of ethical dilemma.

The dilemma, which is more evident to intercultural citizenship teachers, stems from their position as instigators of 'action in the community'. There are two elements to this. First there is the question of how they position themselves in introducing controversial issues on which action might be taken. Should they be 'neutral' and hide their own views? Should they be 'balanced' and make sure all views, including their own, are given space and time? Should they be 'committed' and explicitly seek to 'transform' their learners, and to encourage their learners to 'transform' their own community?

Since they not only introduce controversial issues but also encourage – or even require – 'action in the community', the only real option is the third. This then raises a further question, a second dimension to their dilemma, which is whether they should 'inform' and obtain 'consent' from learners (or their parents or guardians in the case of young learners) before they begin. All education is transformative and most learners tacitly agree to the transformation as they attend educational institutions. (I simplify here by leaving aside a discussion of the compulsory nature of much education.) Yet the kind of methods and aims involved in the intercultural citizenship education field go beyond the usual expectations and the tacit agreement learners enter into as they enrol in schools and universities. This is a complex issue which needs more space than I can devote to it here (Byram *et al.* 2021).

Conclusion

I read CK's text – let us call it the Berkeley approach – while thinking about work of a similar nature I have been involved in with colleagues in Durham (UK) and elsewhere for two decades: let us call it the Durham approach (which involves teachers in several countries – Wagner *et al.* 2018; Wagner *et*

al. 2019). My reading and interpretation is not ‘neutral’, but do we ever read ‘neutrally’? I read as an educationist first and as a language teacher second.

I began this piece by referring to comparative analysis through juxtaposition, and I conclude with some comparisons which helped me to think again about our work, and which may have some implications for the Berkeley approach too.

Declarative and procedural knowledge

In the Berkeley approach, the focus is on declarative knowledge about conflicts and controversial issues in other countries. In the Durham approach, the emphasis is on skills and attitudes and procedural knowledge applied in ‘our community’. Durham teachers include declarative knowledge in their stated teaching aims, but the focus on procedural knowledge has meant that attention to declarative knowledge is not systematic (enough).

Working with lower-level competence learners

The Berkeley teachers were not satisfied that they had achieved their political aims, because the level of language competence in most cases (the Italian classes were the exception) did not allow in-depth discussion and the development of ‘political symbolic competence’. Durham teachers have worked successfully with younger learners and other learners at lower-language competence levels by collaborating with teachers in other subjects who use the first language of students – the language of schooling – and by emphasising procedural knowledge. In doing so, however, they have not paid attention to the larger discourses which Berkeley teachers would want to include.

Teacher status

The particular NSF status of the Berkeley teachers leads to certain constraints imposed by the university, the 2016 ‘Memorandum of Understanding’ of the University of California. Durham teachers exploring intercultural citizenship education include some in higher education who have a research obligation, as well as schoolteachers who do not. Both groups have researched and published and not shown the apparent reluctance to do so of Berkeley NSF. However, two higher education teachers have suffered curtailment of their academic freedom and a degree of censure. ‘Political’ teaching, *politische Bildung*, often deals with controversial issues and is itself controversial. There is a need to address this question more directly than Durham teachers have done hitherto.

Activism and action

Berkeley teachers are, in CK’s words, involved in ‘translingual activism’. Durham teachers are instigators of ‘action in the community’. The former surveyed their students’ needs in advance and found that the students were keen

to talk about controversial matters, and thus would not be surprised by the content of lessons. Ethical concerns in this context would be about the limits of what learners and teachers consider acceptable lesson content. Durham teachers have not reported such consultations with students nor have they reported worries about the ethics of instigating political action. The comparison reveals the importance of reflecting on whether teachers should seek some kind of ‘informed consent’, despite the difficulties.

Native teachers

CK says that the Berkeley teachers were all ‘native teachers’, which made them ‘particularly suited to teach the conflicts in which their home country has been involved’ (p. 342). I assume this is because they have insider or local knowledge. It also made it ‘particularly challenging for them to mediate between their American students’ views and the views of their people back home’ (p. 342). I wonder if it also made it difficult for them to decide on their position, whether ‘neutral’, ‘balanced’ or ‘committed’. Furthermore, their insider knowledge would doubtless make them conscious of variation within ‘views back home’, of dissent from any general consensus – for example, dissent among some Israelis from views about settlements in the West Bank. Some Durham teachers are ‘native’, but not all. There has been no discussion of whether being ‘native’ is better in any way. It is an issue we need to reflect upon.

Paralipomena

CK includes some references to my writings in her literature review, saying there is a difficulty in harmonising my exhortation to ‘challenge’ the status quo. She suggests that my ‘value pluralism’ position includes ‘the right to make the moral judgments’, which is not compatible with to ‘challenge’ what they find in any social group. The right to make a judgment includes the right to refuse to challenge, she says. This reminds me of an example which CK describes in her 1993 book *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*, where the difficulty of translating the American word ‘challenge’ into German is discussed. Perhaps here we have a similar difficulty: of translating British ‘challenge’ into the American. Perhaps the word ‘question’ would cause fewer problems of mutual understanding.

And finally, there is the matter of assessment. Neither Durham nor Berkeley teachers have resolved this, but neither have I tried to do so here.

Notes

1. The value of ‘drama in education’ as promoted by Heathcote and others is a rich methodological source for this kind of work (e.g. Crutchfield and Schewe 2017).

2. There are potential links here with the notion of ‘critical language awareness’ which I do not have space to pursue.

About the author

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