

Some thoughts on the state we are in: A rejoinder to 'Between professionalism and political engagement in foreign-language teaching practice'

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Claire Kramersch concludes her thought-provoking Forum Discussion piece by noting that ultimately it yields more questions than answers. I agree wholeheartedly with this assessment, but the questions it poses are important for applied linguists concerned with foreign-language teaching and learning, even if the answers remain harder to articulate. For me, these questions relate to two main issues: first, the nature of teacher identity, and the problems associated with it, particularly in the current political-economic conjuncture in which teacher professionalism has been, and continues to be, redefined (Gray and Morton 2018); and second, the nature, purpose and practice of foreign-language teaching, within which, following Pennycook (2019), I include English. Clearly these issues overlap, but for the purposes of this commentary I will address them separately.

Beginning with the first issue, it is important to consider the specific nature of the current political-economic conjuncture. Neoliberalism, despite being a 'variegated' phenomenon globally (Brenner *et al.* 2010), and despite being in crisis (Brown 2019), remains the dominant form of global political economy within which most education systems are firmly imbricated. The deleterious

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consequences of this have been discussed extensively (e.g. Gray *et al.* 2020). Writing about the neoliberal reform of education in the UK, John Furlong (2013) points out that although successive British governments from the late 1970s onward have differed in their approaches to policy, all have coincided in the view that education was central to economic development, and the belief in the need for the sector to be thoroughly subjected to market forces. As he explains

education had to be remodeled along neoliberal lines. Therefore, the teaching profession had to be reformed; a new professionalism had to be developed to ensure that teachers would take on government-defined strategies and targets. The best way to ensure that the teaching profession did this was to maintain competitive markets among schools and providers of teacher education. While schools were required to meet targets, have inspections, and be ranked on league tables, universities and other providers of teacher education were required to deliver teachers willing and able to embrace this centrally defined, target-driven culture (Furlong 2013: 40).

This new professionalism (certainly for schoolteachers) also entailed a narrow focus on subject knowledge and knowledge of classroom management, with little in the way of any broader historical, philosophical and sociological perspectives on education. Such reforms have always entailed implicit assumptions with regard to the content of lessons, regardless of subject – but as governments committed to neoliberalism in many countries have become increasingly populist and authoritarian, what can and cannot be discussed in classrooms (including those in universities) has moved more overtly centre stage. Recent attempts to render illegitimate any discussion in educational settings of critical race theory, or content informed by it, as well as of anti-capitalist ideas (Busby 2020), are typical of what Nancy Fraser (2017) describes as hyper-reactionary neoliberalism (exemplified in the politics espoused by figures such as Trump, Bolsonaro and Johnson and the social forces they represent). They are also instances of attempts at a further recalibration of the remit of teachers and the nature of their professionalism.

The kind of professionalism encapsulated in the Memorandum of Understanding described by Kramsch is typical of that required of language teachers in many university settings in the Global North. Thus pedagogical effectiveness, a commitment to excellence and a dedication to students' needs are foregrounded – as well as a commitment to (limited) reflection 'in support of the department's academic mission', political objectivity and avoidance of instructional materials 'unrelated to the course'. It is little wonder that the Berkeley teachers felt themselves hampered in their attempts to address politically contentious issues more fully with their students in ways which were compatible with critical approaches to language teaching and learning. The tension between – if not the incompatibility of – the teachers' expression of

their political identities and the (supposedly apolitical) model of professional identity required by the university is evident. That said, the extent to which they were able even to broach the topics they did is a reminder of the affordances (however limited) of the university classroom when compared with those of the school setting, or the commercial foreign language sector. Max (a pseudonym), a teacher of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) I interviewed as part of a research project (Gray 2010), reflected as follows on his experience of working in the commercial sector in Egypt:

Max: I remember like in fact in Egypt the successful teacher was the person who managed to stay off the hot topics. [...] We were told, I mean for example, 'you're not, don't talk about politics, don't talk about sex, religion, blah, blah, blah'.

John: Who told you that?

Max: We were told by the directors of studies, and people who were good teachers managed to steer the class very, you know, effectively around this.

(Author's data)

Here we see what might be called the commercial sector's 'edu-business' (Ball 2012) constraints at work. Students in this setting are very much viewed as customers, and teachers are positioned as service providers whose narrow remit is the effective delivery of language – understood in ways which are completely at odds with the *savoir s'engager* aspect of language teaching and learning described by Kramsch. Increasingly, the dominant model of professional identity for foreign language teachers at all levels is that of *effective practitioner*. Teachers ascribed this identity are expected to keep their political (and other) identities outside the classroom, making it difficult for them to lay claim to other professional identities such as that of *reflective practitioner*, *critical pedagogue* or indeed that of *translingual activist*.

My colleague Tom Morton and I explored these issues in some depth in our book on English language teacher identity (Gray and Morton 2018). In the chapter on teachers' social class and political identity construction we held a group discussion with three experienced teachers from the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) sector, which in the UK refers to those teachers who work mainly with migrants. All three were members of English for Action, a Freirean-inspired organisation committed to 'participatory ESOL' (Bryers 2015), an approach in which the teacher is viewed as someone who also learns from the students, and in which there is an overt critique of social hierarchies, as well as an overall commitment to social change and the role that language might play in this. At the time of the group discussion all three were also involved with colleagues across the sector in a campaign called Action for ESOL, which had come into existence as a response to govern-

ment cuts to adult education. This campaign¹ produced a manifesto (Action for ESOL 2012), which lists 35 points under seven headings: Defending our sector; Funding; The right to learn the common language of the UK; Language, community and diversity; Defending the ESOL identity; Professionalism; and Pedagogy. The nine aspects of professionalism include such items as the right and the responsibility of teachers to engage in political issues which affect language students, recognition of the political and social role of teachers, the right to a proper contract and access to training and ongoing professional development, as well as access to research about the nature of language and the use of language in society. The section on professionalism begins:

ESOL teacher professionalism is not only a matter of individuals developing their classroom skills. The classroom cannot be isolated from the institutional and social world, and to focus solely on classroom methodology leads to a narrow and restrictive idea of professionalism. Language education, like all education, encompasses issues of power and culture. It is inherently political. For ESOL teachers to be truly professional, they need the opportunities to learn about and discuss the political context of ESOL, i.e. the social, cultural and political realities that shape migrant lives and which often cause exclusion and marginalisation. (Action for ESOL 2012: 7)

This model of teacher professionalism is that of the teacher as *critical pedagogue* or theorising practitioner, whose professionalism is *claimed* by teachers themselves rather than *ascribed* by institutions or government. But of course, teachers *are* also ascribed a professional identity, and this is often at odds with the ways in which they understand their work and the identity they wish to claim. This was evident in the stories told by Susan, Liz and Peter (pseudonyms), the three ESOL teachers in the above-mentioned group discussion. Before becoming ESOL teachers, Liz and Peter had worked as EFL teachers in various parts of the world, an experience of teaching they viewed negatively. Susan, on the other hand, had always worked in ESOL, and explained that her political activism and her interest in language had drawn her to the sector in the first place. She saw it as ‘the perfect job’, allowing her to combine all the interests in her life. Liz’s trajectory was very different. As a young woman she had worked in Barcelona:

I was mainly teaching posh people, not totally posh, but by the very dint of the fact that people were going to private language schools meant that they were prioritising that for their kids, or that they themselves thought it was going to help their careers. [...] So I always felt a bit like a service provider in a way, in the EFL sector in Barcelona. [...] And then when I came into ESOL in London, then I felt a bit like Susan, like OK, I understand this world better, it feels more, more constructive and helpful and useful to be in this world, than to feel like I’m serving the future careers of rich people. [...] So ESOL was a huge relief in many ways. (adapted from Gray and Morton 2018: 109–110)

Peter expressed similar views, saying that his experience left him feeling ‘massively conflicted’ and ‘angry the whole time’. He added:

It was something that made me very determined that, that if I wanted to go back to London, then I’d do something that I wanted to do, rather than be a servant, because I did, I massively felt like a servant. (adapted from Gray and Morton 2018: 112)

For these teachers, ESOL offered a professional identity which enabled them to feel socially useful and a means of relating to their students as equals, rather than as service providers. It also allowed them to engage in teaching with a greater sense of personal agency and in ways which were compatible with their political outlook.

But organisations such as English for Action are not mainstream. In many educational settings critical pedagogy is not an option. In their empirical study of critical pedagogy and teacher education in the US, Susan Groenke and J. Amos Hatch (2009) show how many teacher educators felt they were unable to do critical work of the kind they wanted to do as it ran counter to the kind of professionalism they were expected to develop in their student teachers, while others feared that openly advocating critical pedagogy approaches would impact negatively on their chances of obtaining tenure. Those who did promote critical pedagogy in their classes said that they quietly ‘subvert[ed] the dominant discourse’ when opportunities presented themselves, and that they did what they could ‘while flying under the radar’ (Groenke and Hatch 2009: 76). My point here is that claiming a professional identity that is consonant with a critical, socially transformative political outlook is often difficult. As Maggie Maclure’s (1993) study of British teachers leaving the profession in the face of yet more neoliberal reform showed, many of those departing felt they were no longer able to reconcile their existing professional and political identities with the new *effective practitioner* identity they were expected to adopt.

Moving on then to the nature, purpose and practice of foreign language teaching, Claire Kramsch has rightly pointed out elsewhere that ‘[n]o field of education has been subjected more frequently to the ebbs and flows of global geopolitics than foreign language (FL) education’ (Kramsch 2019: 50). Even before the advent of the neoliberal era (which we can date from the social, economic and political experiment embarked on in the wake of the overthrow of the Allende government in Chile in 1973), foreign language learning had already acquired an instrumental framing under the aegis of globalisation. The monolingualism and the native speakerism associated with the communicative approach certainly played their part in the reconfiguration of foreign learning as mere skill acquisition. As Edward Said (1993: 369) noted ruefully with regard to the kind of English being taught to large numbers of students in Middle Eastern universities in the 1980s:

The reason for the large numbers of students taking English was given frankly by a somewhat disaffected instructor: many of the students proposed to end up working for airlines, or banks, in which English was the worldwide *lingua franca*. This all but terminally consigned English to the level of a technical language stripped of expressive and aesthetic characteristics and denuded of any critical or self-conscious dimension. You learned English to use computers, respond to orders, transmit telexes, decipher manifests, and so forth. That was all.

Even in those instances where literature was still taught, Said noticed that ‘no emphasis was placed on the relationship between English and the colonial processes that brought the language and its literature to the Arab world’ and there was little interest in ‘the new English-language literatures of the Caribbean, Africa, or Asia’ (Said 1993: 369).

What Said was lamenting, and what those in our field making the case for translanguaging approaches (García *et al.* 2021) and translanguing activism (Pennycook 2019) today seek to redress, is the erasure of a genuine educational understanding of foreign language teaching and learning. On the one hand, there is what might be called the Humboldtian tradition (as found, for example, in the work of Michael Byram), which holds that L2 learning offers students the opportunity to relativise their worldview and to learn about others and the ways in which they encode the world, while simultaneously enabling them to reflect on themselves and their own language using. And, on the other, there is the case for decolonising foreign language teaching (Macedo 2019), in which a rigidly monolingual pedagogy is resisted and in which translation (as recommended in the Discussion Form) is brought centre stage. Translation is in fact central to foreign language learning – and indeed to all language using. As George Steiner (1975: 47) argued eloquently in his seminal study *After Babel*, ‘*inside or between languages, human communication equals translation*’ (italics in original); to have had it removed from the foreign language classroom has been to the impoverishment of foreign language pedagogy, as indeed the loss of literature teaching has been (Kramsch and Kramsch 2000). However, as applied linguists committed to progressive education and the creation of a fairer world, we face an uphill battle as the values we hold dear are not always those of the structures within which we operate. I do not share the philosopher Didier Eribon’s (2013: 121) pessimism, as he reflects on his own education in France:

Teachers do the best they can! But in fact there is little or nothing they can do when faced with the irresistible forces of the social order, forces that operate both in secret and in the light of day, and that impose themselves everywhere and on everyone.

However, I do feel, as I have argued elsewhere (e.g. Gray 2019), that significant change in education will only come about when there is significant structural

change. Our struggle therefore cannot be confined to the classroom and to flying under the radar on the occasions when it is possible (important though that is). We also need to keep our focus on the bigger picture and the broader struggle for structural change.

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Note

1. For more details about the Action for ESOL campaign see <http://actionforesol.org>.

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