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Dialoguing Across Difference in Adult Second Language Learning

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Abstract: This roundtable discussion attempts “to trouble and worry” an example from teaching practice that raises questions about how difference and identity interrupt dominant discourses during ESL classroom dialogue.

The focus of this discussion is to examine one example of how discourses in the popular media surface in the adult English-as-Second-Language (ESL) classroom, and to raise questions about the role of dialogue in adult learners’ understandings of difference and identity. Dialogue is a central tenet in critical language learning (Freire, 2005), and through dialogue we discover differences in our relationship with others, which partly contribute to the ongoing construction of identity (Hall, 1996). Burbules (2000) explains, however, that classroom dialogue, rather than being inclusive, in fact marginalizes and diminishes difference. Difference, therefore, needs to be theorized in terms of power because those who are marginalized are often constituted as different by dominant discourses which essentialize immigrant identities (i.e. “visible minority,” “ESL speaker”) (Bannerji, 2000; Elenes, 2003). This is significant for the adult ESL field because as Pennycook (2001) asserts, theories and practices in ESL and second language acquisition (SLA) “have tended to operate with shallow and static notions of difference and identity” (p.145). In Canada, they have also tended to operate from a liberal multicultural perspective, rather than a critical perspective, in which contradictory discourses of “sharing” cultural customs intersect with notions of conformity and consensus. The following section will provide a brief summary of an example of how dominant discourses were interrupted in an ESL class.

The class consisted of twelve advanced-level ESL learners in a language skills development program funded by a provincial government. All the learners had been in Canada for at least one year and held professional and graduate degrees from their countries of origin. Students listened to a CBC radio news report, which included a story about the 2005 publication in a Danish newspaper of cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed. During the debriefing on the news report, one student remarked, “We all know Muslims are hypersensitive.” This sparked an immediate response from another student who explained in detail why the cartoons were offensive, and therefore, to defend that Muslims were not hypersensitive. Other members of the class joined the discussion in an attempt to critique the political motives for the release of these cartoons.

There are various perspectives from which this interaction can be theorized. Volosinov (1973) explains that within the domain of signs and ideology, difference exists as each ideological system has its own orientation toward reality and functions within a material reality of social life. He maintains that understanding can only arise in social interaction between people. Refraction surfaces through difference by the intersection of differently oriented social interests. Kolger (1996) asserts that it is possible “to learn to see ourselves *as other from the genuinely understood perspective of another*” through a reciprocal process whereby the speakers become conscious of historical-cultural assumptions (p. 172, emphasis in original). These perspectives, however, are premised on speakers having a certain level of openness to alternative points of view. In the context of the classroom, the notion of openness is problematic as some ESL teachers and students are uncomfortable with engaging social and political issues.

Pinet (2006), in a study consisting of five ESL instructors teaching in the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program, found that only one of the five teachers was actively willing to engage in controversial themes and saw her teaching practice as transformational pedagogy. There are multiple reasons why this may be the case. ESL curricula tend to be focused on conformity and adaptation to Canadian norms. Discourses of liberal multiculturalism are prevalent in the ESL field. Teachers do not feel equipped to deal with controversial socio-political concepts. Pressures to help students enter the labour market take precedence over concepts of active citizenship.

Burbules (2000) believes dialogue needs to be reassessed for being an inherently liberatory form of pedagogy because rather than being inclusive, it may be normalizing and diminish difference. Controversial themes connected to identity and differences do emerge (both intentionally and unintentionally) in the classroom, and for some adult learners there is a desire to interrupt, contest, and make sense of them. At the same time, to what extent do these themes compromise feelings of safety for some learners? By suppressing opportunities to discuss these issues for the sake of consensus and harmony, to what extent are teaching practices hindering opportunities to negotiate understandings of identity and difference. Identities and differences are not parked at the door when learners and instructors enter the second language classroom. How do we learn to dwell safely within spaces where uncomfortable dialogue surfaces?

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