Multiliteracies Pedagogy in the Context of Adult Refugee Migrant ESL Learners

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Abstract

This paper looks at the pedagogy of multiliteracies. The pedagogy of multiliteraicies was developed in response to the failure of traditional literacy pedagogies to recognise the cultural and linguistic diversity of learners in a variety of educational contexts and the emergence of new literacies as a result of new technologies. Its aim is to reduce the knowledge gaps experienced by marginalised groups and encompass emerging technologies. Cultural and linguistic diversity are characteristics of refugee migrant learners. The pedagogy of multiliteracies pedagogy directly addresses the some of the challenges facing educators teaching English as a second language, specifically the need to design and evaluate learning activities which take into account the diverse cultural and educational backgrounds of adult refugee migrants and at the same time achieve the desired educational outcomes. This paper is based on the author's studies in education and experience using multiliteracies pedagogy as a framework while working with adult ESL learners in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Keywords: *migrant refugees, adult learners, multiliteracies pedagogy*

> *Knowledge is not produced in the intentions of those who believe they hold it.*
> *It is produced in the process of interaction ... at the moment of ... engagement.*
>
> *David Lusted, 1986*

In "Why Pedagogy?" media educator David Lusted argued that to improve media education, media educators needed more than a well designed syllabus; they needed pedagogy [10]. The primary role of pedagogy is to link curriculum content (desired knowledge) with desired learning outcomes. It provides the theoretical framework which guides educational activities in any particular context. When framed as the management of learning, rather than focusing teaching practices, pedagogy becomes more inclusive and learner centred. This framing also sidesteps the unproductive pedagogy vs. andragogy debate [7]. Before looking more closely at multiliteracies pedagogy as a theory of education, it is useful to consider briefly the relationship between theory and practice and, the context in which second language learning takes place in New Zealand.

Theory and practice are often talked about as if they exist at opposite ends of a continuum. Theoretical is equated with academic, the converse of practical, and therefore not useful. But the relationship between theory and practice is dialectical; how we teach and what we teach is based, at least in part, on our beliefs or theories of education. Our experience in turn validates or modifies our theories. Theories offer a way of making sense of experience through a critical interpretation of that experience and have the potential to shed new light on practical problems.

> *There is nothing so practical as a good theory*
>
> *Kurt Lewin (1890-1947)*

Refugee Migrants in Aotearoa

Refugee migrants do not learn English in isolation. Economic interests, political ideologies, social values and norms are ever present variables. Education is mobilised in times of need to meet the demands of new technologies or social circumstances but is also affected by other variables. Specific goals and objectives, organisational structures, which includes families, available technologies or resources, and people, all influence what is done and what can be done. This can be expressed diagrammatically:
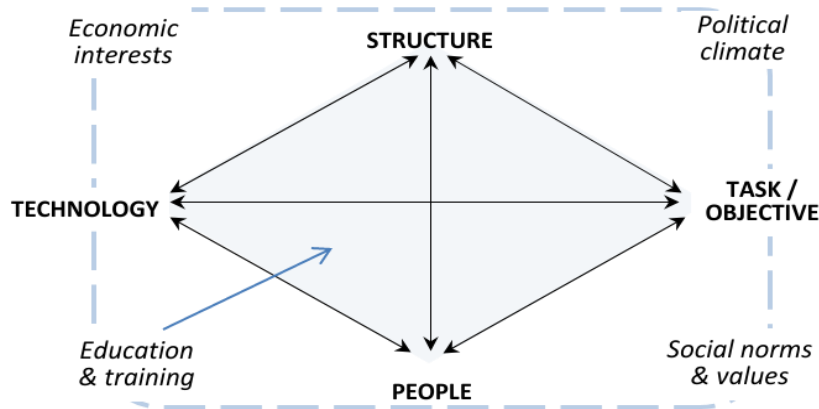
Fig. 1. Tippett's relational model based on Kurt Lewin's field theory

Kurt Lewin's field theory [9] is less well known than Pierre Bourdieu's ideas of habitus and cultural reproduction but has the same basic premise: to provide a conceptual framework for analysing patterns of interaction between individuals and their environments. In Tippett's relational model the axial and diagonal lines indicate the connections between specific elements. The importance of any one element varies in relation to the dominance of other factors in the field which act as driving or restraining forces [14]. For example, the digital technologies available to a learner will influence their ability to access on-line learning; their role in the family structure and the demands this might place on the learner will influence and affect their goals and objectives. ESL educators are also subject to restraining and driving forces.

Refugee Migrants in Aotearoa

Refugee migrants in New Zealand learn English in a variety of environments. If they have come to Aotearoa through the UNHCR they receive an intensive six week orientation which introduces them to different aspects of New Zealand life and basic English. UNHCR sponsored migrants are also entitled to subsidised English (ESOL) classes with registered providers once their residency is established. While some of these providers are not-for-profit organisations, most are businesses who must necessarily remain profitable. This has implications for their hiring practices. Many ESL teachers are hired on a short term or casual basis and have a diverse range of qualifications and experience. Some ESL teachers have worked in the field for years, others are recent graduates. Many come from backgrounds other than language studies. But, whether paid or volunteer, trained or relying on native language knowledge and experience, ESL teachers are often a critical part of refugee migrants successful resettlement.

Not all refugee migrants come to New Zealand through the UNHCR program. Some are sponsored by relatives already living in the country. Others apply for asylum for religious, political or social reasons once they arrive in New Zealand. These learners become eligible for subsidised ESOL classes once granted residency. Still other refugee migrants who have met eligibility criteria for residency through their qualifications, but because they do not meet the English language requirements need to pay for instruction as part of their visa requirements. An ESL classroom in New Zealand may have more than seven different language groups represented with learners whose educational backgrounds range from university graduates to newly literate. What they share in common is that they need to learn English if they are to thrive in the country that is now their home.

The Multiliteracies Project

Language learning is a socially mediated practice which takes place an environment where social values and norms, economic interests and political ideologies, influence how it is managed. The multiliteracies project was begun in the early 1990s by an international group of literacy and language educators in response to the failure of traditional literacy pedagogies to adequately address the linguistic and cultural diversity of learners from indigenous, migrant, and impoverished communities. Or, to recognise the emergence of new literacies linked to information and communication technologies. This failure is

articulated by James Paul Gee, one of the original members of the what became known as the New London Group, in what is now considered a classic text: Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in Discourses [6]. In this text Gee shows how language and literacy education is not a neutral activity but inextricably linked to reinforcing and maintaining dominant power relations by valuing some discourses above others.

The New London group set out to develop an approach to language and literacy learning that would reduce the knowledge gaps experienced by marginalised groups and also encompass new technologies. As well as their own experiences, they drew on the work of a wide range of theorists including American educationalist John Dewey, social linguist Dell Hymes, Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky, and Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire [5]. They called approach the Pedagogy of Multiliteracies [11].

The assumptions of multiliteracies pedagogy are that communication is multimodal; meaning making is an active process of designing; and, there is productive diversity. This recognises that although there may be established ways of communicating meaning, there is no single 'correct' way. The commitments of multiliteracies pedagogy are that there is transparency of process and that education must benefit the learner.
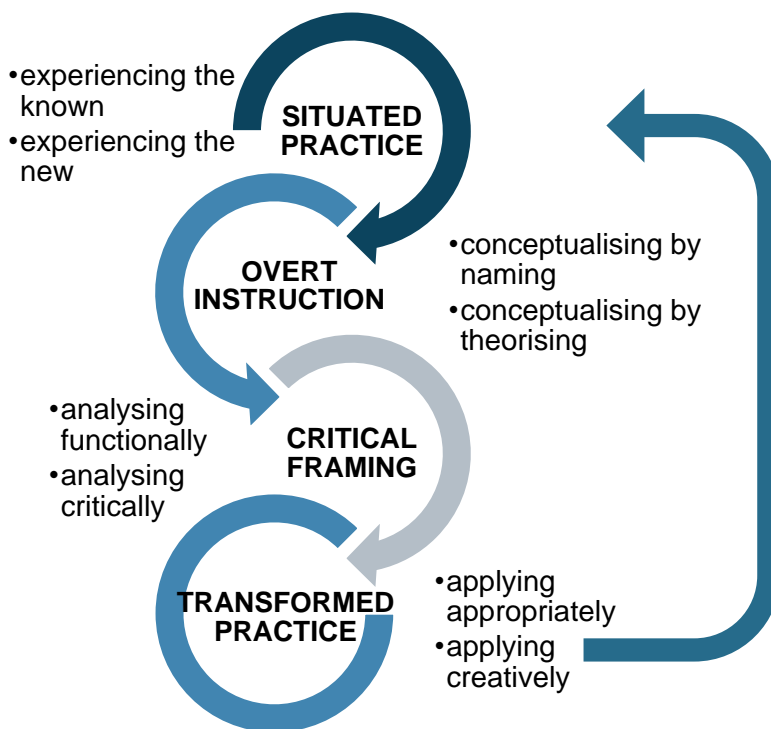

Fig. 2. Dynamic representation of multiliteracies pedagogy

There are four key elements to the pedagogy of multiliteracies: situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing and transformed practice. These have also been identified as experiencing, conceptualising, analysing and applying. The starting point of multiliteracies pedagogy is always situated practice but it is important to note that the four elements of the pedagogy of multiliteracies are not sequential, but are part of an iterative and continuous process of making meaningful connections between what Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis, also members of the original New London group, identify as knowledge processes: "the kinds of activity, or things you do to know" [4].

Situated practice involves identifying both what the learner knows and, what is considered important to know. It recognises the realities of the learners' life world (the known) and the life world the learner is entering (the new). Situated practice provides opportunities for learners to experience the new and unfamiliar from the perspective of the known. This can take a number of different forms from personal story telling and role plays to supported experience of authentic situations in the real world.

Overt instruction, which is the basis of much traditional teaching, sets out to close knowledge gaps and help learners manage their learning. It does this by making those gaps explicit by naming and theorising about them. This may involve explicit conversation about language but also includes vocabulary building, reviewing sentence constructions and modelling appropriate dialogue. Overt instruction may be delivered by a teacher but it may equally come in the form of physical or electronic guides and checklists and through the support of more capable others in group work.

Critical framing helps the learner relate new knowledge to what they already know by analysing it critically and functionally with reference to learner's life world which produces new understanding from a position of strength. Transformed practice is demonstrated when learners are able to apply their new understanding and knowledge appropriately and creatively.

Multiliteracies Pedagogy as Guiding Framework for ESL Educators

Multiliteracies pedagogy is a critical education theory. Critical education theory is concerned with identifying the social conditions which prevent or frustrate educational goals in order to eliminate them, or at least reduce their impact [16]. The social purpose of multiliteracies pedagogy is to foster the critical engagement necessary for learners to access the evolving language of work, power, and community through a more inclusive approach to cultural, linguistic, communicative, and technological diversity; in other words to ensure that they have the skills and resources to design their own social futures as individuals, citizens and workers. This closely aligns with the purpose of ESL in the context of refugee migrants.

The four elements of the pedagogy of multiliteracies link what English educational theorist Basil Bernstein [1] called the three inter-related message systems of an educational knowledge code: curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in one clear schema. The first three elements also correspond with the three main orientations to education: transactional, transmissive and transformative.

Situated practice is transactional, it is based on learners *experiencing* the unfamiliar as active knowledgeable participants. Overt instruction recognises that there is a role for traditional transmissive practices to fill knowledge gaps and *conceptualising* the new by naming and theorising about it. Through critical framing learners analyse their language understandings functionally and critically. This *analysing* is transformative which is demonstrated by learners *applying* creatively and appropriately the language knowledge they have acquired through transformed practice.

So why should ESL educators embrace multiliteracies pedagogy? There is no lack of theory about how language is acquired [8]. Nor, is there any lack of prescriptions about how language and literacy should be taught. These include strategies to support language development, suggested curriculum progressions and classroom management, Not only that, the internet has made available a seemingly endless supply of teaching materials. The challenge as second language educators is to navigate this vast ocean in a way that produces the educational outcomes we want for the learners we support. One way to do this is to be reflective practitioners [2], to look at what we do and how we do it critically. We need to ask what is the purpose of what we do and who does it serve? It is not enough to have good intentions and knowledge of a subject, it is also necessary to have some understanding of how knowledge is produced and re-produced.

Multiliteracies pedagogy is a multi-layered and multi-dimensional theoretical framework which looks at how knowledge is produced and reproduced. Since it was first put forward pedagogy of multiliteracies has been applied in a variety of educational contexts [3], including language teaching and learning [12],[13]. The flexible and learner focused approach has made it especially popular with educators working with marginalised groups [15]. It can be put into practice simply by asking how any given activity serves the desired learning outcome by identifying where it fits into the schema of multiliteracies pedagogy: does it give learners the opportunity to experience new knowledge in authentic and relevant ways? Does it recognise and refer to learners existing knowledge and competencies? Does it give them the tools to be self-directed learners?

Adopting a multiliteracies approach is no quick fix to the challenge of teaching adult refugee learners but I have found it does offer a useful and easy to apply guide. By providing a way to identify and evaluate language learning activities both in terms of their educational orientations and purpose, it gives second language educators who work with adult refugee migrants a practical way to critically look at their

practices from a theoretically and ethically sound perspective. For these reasons I think that it is worth considering.

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