Boundaries Crossed, and New Frontiers: Ongoing Theoretical, Empirical, & Pedagogical Issues in Language Education

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Chapter 15

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Achilleas Kostoulas

1. Introduction

The aim of this volume was to question the idea of boundaries in language education. Challenging, in the sense used here, does not necessarily mean to negate. As Neumann, Wegener, Fest, Niemietz, and Hützen (2017) remind us, "to challenge a boundary is not always to criticize or tear it down. Challenging a boundary is a process of testing". This involves raising awareness of such boundaries, tracing their lines, problematizing the processes that create and sustain them, and the functions they serve, and imagining alternatives. The thirteen substantive chapters that make up this collection have done so, by examining various aspects of language education, and using a variety of theoretical perspectives and empirical methods. A central theme running through the book is that such boundaries, between theoretical viewpoints, between domains like research and practice, between curricular areas, and between geographical regions seem to function less as rigid demarcation lines and more like interfaces of communication, or meeting spaces where new possibilities are created. In the paragraphs that follow, I first list and summarize some of these new connections (Section 2), and then go on to suggest some future directions for the field (Section 3).

2. Boundaries Crossed

All the chapters in the collection involved the interrogation of one or more lines separating aspects of the profession (e.g., curricular areas), or lines bounding language education as a whole, and setting it apart from other domains of professional existence (or even, in the case of the contribution by Babić & Talbot [Chapter 11], non-professional activity). Collectively, they make a compelling case for rethinking language education in more integrated terms across a range of levels, ranging from intra-personal perspectives to increasingly wider communities.

2.1. Teachers and Learners

At the level of the individual, an integrated perspective involves challenging boundaries in two ways. Firstly, it involves moving beyond purely cognitive accounts of language teaching and learning. For instance, Mewald (Chapter 9) argues for a form of pedagogy in which becoming communicatively competent involves not just cognitive language abilities, but also volitional and motivational aspects, personal readiness, and social opportunities. Thinking about teachers, Costantino (Chapter 5) describes her professional development as she moved from "disembodied, structured, cognitive activity" (Cunliffe, 2004, p. 409) to professional existence that was more attuned to its ethical dimensions. Similarly, in Chapter 4, Stelma and Fay discuss the limitations of a "critical-cognitive" perspective, which privileges rational categories to the exclusion of constructs like feelings and emotions.

At the same time, multiple contributions have pointed out how static categorizations and identities are being challenged, and replaced with mode dynamic ways of constructing our professional identities. The linguistic self-portraits of learners in superdiverse schools, which are reported by Schwarzl, Vetter, and Janík (Chapter 13), provide a vivid image of such hybridization, as the learners fused multiple linguistic identities, at times merging into each other. A similar fusion, this time with reference to disciplinary identity, is described by Vourdanou (Chapter 6) as the aim of CLIL teacher education. Some insights into how such identities are constructed, and into their dynamism, are provided by Moser and Kletzenbauer (Chapter 10), who point out that global changes and "personal, social and cultural circumstances" challenge the traditionally defined identities of language teachers and their notions of self.

2.2.   Learning Communities

Similar processes of hybridization and integration are visible in learning communities, such as schools and classrooms. With languages and cultures no longer being territorially situated, multilingual schools and classrooms, such as the ones described by Schwartzl et al. (Chapter 13) are becoming increasingly common (see also similar references to linguistically and culturally diverse learning settings in the chapters by Vourdanou [Chapter 6], and Moser & Kletzenbauer [Chapter 10]). Similarly, we are witnessing the emergence of transnational social fields (or "transnational discourse communities", see Kostoulas, 2018), such as the ones created by the study abroad experience (Hessel, Chapter 12). Such changes are creating a

need for innovative forms of language education that capitalize on the unique potential of such communities, like the Framework for Intercomprehension Methodology proposed by Mewald (Chapter 9), or Multicultural Awareness Through English (Fay, Lytra, & Ntavaliagkou, 2010). They also necessitate novel forms of teacher preparation, like the one described in Chapter 14 (Kitsiou et al.), which enable teachers to imagine, semiotically relate to, and pedagogically engage an increasingly diverse learner population.

Apart from changing populations, learning communities are also being transformed because of an ongoing renegotiation of traditional divisions of labour. This development connects to the observations made in the previous section about the synergies between curricular areas (see especially the chapters by Vourdanou [Chapter 6] and Tatzl [Chapter 8]). This is not an always a straightforward act of boundary crossing, because, as Tatzl notes in Chapter 8, "disciplines have traditionally have been forged by different research traditions and methods as well as by specific educational paths […] of their practitioners". Another boundary line that is being crossed is the one demarcating research and practice as distinct regions of activity. As Tatzl demonstrates in Chapter 8, practitioner case studies that are firmly grounded on the realities and challenges of teaching practice, and draw on appropriately adapted research methods, have the potential to reinforce pedagogical innovation, by affirming good practice and identifying areas for potential development. Taking a different tack, in Chapter 5, Costantino shows how Exploratory Practice, a form of practitioner research that integrates pedagogical practice and research activity (Hanks, 2017), assisted her in her own professional development.

2.3. Curriculum

Turning our attention to the curriculum, the critical interrogation of boundaries that is ongoing in both theory and practice is expanding the horizon of what is methodologically possible in language education. A very visible development in this area is the increasing popularity of hybrid forms of pedagogy, like CLIL and English Medium Instruction, in primary/secondary and tertiary instruction respectively. Such forms of pedagogy do not just involve the co-existence of linguistic and content-related goals and practices that were previously compartmentalized; rather, they require a "multidimensional notion of integration" whereby (language) education functions as the point where "diverse institutional, educational, personal and pedagogical scripts intersect" (Nikula, Dalton-Puffer,

Llinares, & Lorenzo, 2016, p. 8). This, in turn, heightens the need for discourse spaces and communities of practice, like the one described by Vourdanou (Chapter 6), where such osmosis might take place.

Perhaps less visible, but at least as important, is the opening up of possibilities that is indexed in terms like "Global Education" (Lütge, 2015) and "Global Citizenship" (Birch, 2009). This vision for language education, which is akin to *Bildung* (see Mewald, Chapter 9), is put forward as an alternative to technocratic forms of language teaching and language learning that aim narrowly at fostering communicative competence for instrumental aims. The aims of Global Education, as Wehrmann helpfully elaborates in Chapter 7, involve the integration of linguistic, literary, cultural, and ecological learning. To this, one can add the ontological and ethical dimensions of our professional existence, as discussed by Costantino, and the imperative to achieve "quality of life" and intergenerational responsibility (Chapter 5). While not explicitly connected to Global Education, the concerns raised by Babić and Talbot about ensuring teachers' wellbeing (Chapter 11), also reflect the ongoing problematization regarding sustainable and ethically responsible forms of language education.

2.4. Language Education Theory and Practice

One more boundary that many contributions in this volume challenged is the one separating professional practice on the one hand, from language education theory and research on the other. This discussion was initiated by Skela (Chapter 2), who elaborated on the close, reciprocal links between teaching practice and academic ideas (which he metaphorically likened to the water cycle), and with teacher education (which serves the dual purpose of connecting them and providing a vantage point). In Chapter 5, Costantino elaborated further on these connections by describing her professional existence as *praxis*, a meaningful fusion of thinking and doing, professional action and reflection on it.

Complementing this perspective, the chapters by Kostoulas (Chapter 3), and Stelma and Fay (Chapter 4) aim at integrating diverse theoretical perspectives that inform language education and show how theoretical accounts connect to practice. In Chapter 3, Kostoulas defines language education theory as a synthesis of linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical insights, and suggests that the products of this synthesis guide the processes of theorization, reflection and action, which – he cautions – could either reinforce or challenge the *status quo* on language education. In a similar vein, Stelma and Fay (Chapter 4) bring together a number

of perspectives on critical thinking, and argue that a critically-informed ecological understanding of the context (a "critical-intentional stance") can inform professional action that has the potential to challenge "unjust orders" in language education.

Informed by different theoretical perspectives, looking at different contexts and populations, and using different methods, the chapters that make up this volume share a common ground in the way they relate to the construct of the "border". As ongoing political and conceptual developments keep eroding the lines that have bounded and compartmentalized language education, the authors foreground the liminal spaces, they turn their analytical focus on the blending of populations, disciplines, and theories that is taking place there, and they imagine the potential of these ongoing fusions. It is to the implications of these processes that we will now turn to.

1. New Frontiers

The overarching theme of this volume is that theoretical, disciplinary, and geographical boundaries no longer carry their legitimating force in language education, or – alternatively – that divesting them from such force can open up new pedagogical possibilities, ideally oriented towards visions of an ethically responsible and socially just model of language education. However, it also needs to be pointed out that boundaries also provide structure, focus, theoretical coherence, and direction to the enterprise of language education. At a time of post-certainty (Chapter 1), the psychological security and the efficient use of resources that is associated with unambiguous normative assumptions are not insignificant considerations. With this in mind, in this section, I will outline a few final thoughts that have been prompted by the chapters of the book, and which delineate what I perceive to be emerging orders of theory, research, and teaching and learning in a post-boundary landscape of language education.

3.1. Theory: Thinking about Language Education

Chapters 3 to 5 in the volume focused, in various ways, on language education theory, and described different ways of combining aspects of language teaching, language learning, and thinking and learning about language education. It is not my intention to privilege any one of these perspectives, but I do believe that for a re-envisaged language education theory (whether "capital-T", or "small-t") to most effectively achieve its authority-providing role, it will need to conform to four principles. First, it should adopt an *interdisciplinary outlook*,

which is to say that it should be open to insights from informing disciplines, but (as I pointed out in Chapter 3) these insights should meaningfully complement each other. Related to this, it should actively *nativize*, rather than passively import, insights from adjoining disciplinary spaces. In other words, it should acknowledge that theoretical insights are embedded in cultural, historical, and political frames in which they were originally generated. Therefore, importing them in language education must involve an act of "reframing", or meaningfully connecting them to the aims, assumptions, disciplinary traditions, and structures of language education (Chapter 4, by Stelma and Fay, provides useful guidance for such intellectual work). Thirdly, acts of theoretical boundary crossing should have direct and meaningful *connections to practice*. The chapters that make up Part B of the collection (Chapters 6 to 9) provide some examples of such connections. And, finally, forging connections with other disciplines involves *sharing perspectives*, rather than just absorbing input. To confine myself to one example, language education has a long and rich tradition of engaging with concepts like linguistic diversity, culture contact, and intercultural encounters – capitalizing on this background (as is done, e.g., in Chapter 9, by Claudia Mewald) is just one way in which language education can germinate thinking in adjoining fields.

3.2.   Research: Learning about Language Education

The erosion of boundaries in language education has a number of epistemological implications about the ways in which research about language learning and teaching is enacted. Although many of the challenges that will be described in the following paragraphs have been dealt with, in various ways, from a variety of perspectives, the argument that I wish to put forward here is that a more integrated approach is possible, drawing on Complex Systems Theory (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008), which seems well suited to addressing the particularities of a densely interconnected field where borders are "fuzzy".

One salient consideration regarding research in language education is that lack of clarity regarding activities, roles, and identities, and the heightened awareness of their interconnectivity all seem to call into question the effectiveness of analytical research methods, or methods that segment phenomena from their context and study them in isolation. Such an approach, I argued in Kostoulas (2018), artificially reduces the complexity of language education in order to make it conceptually manageable, which is an unsatisfactory trade-off; I further proposed that a Complex Systems Theory perspective is a

preferable alternative, because it "studies systems [e.g., learners, classes, schools, education systems] by synthesizing, rather than reducing, their diversity" (p. 42). The same can be said for most ecologically-informed perspectives, such as the one described by Stelma and Fay in Chapter 4, with which complexity thinking is compatible. At the same time, the shift of empirical attention away from clearly discernible cases, agents, actions, and constructs, seems to suggest an increased prominence of the *border* as an analytical category. This, in turn, also foregrounds the potential of theoretical frames that help to account for the "fuzziness" of borders, and their function as interfaces between the phenomenon under study and the structures in which it is embedded. In this sense too, complexity thinking, which posits that the phenomena under study are "ambiguously bounded" (Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 94), can provide researchers with a conceptually sophisticated theoretical account of boundaries, and the phenomena that take place in and around them.

An additional set of epistemological concerns stems from the observation that language education research is increasing in scope, sometimes including surprising additions (e.g., Chapter 8, by Babić & Talbot). Such growth suggests a need for a diverse range of research instruments, which respect disciplinary particularities and contextual exigency. These might include multi-sited ethnography (e.g., Chapter 13 by Schwartzl et al.), participatory research (e.g., Chapters 6 and 15, by Tatzl, and Kitsiou et al., respectively), and phenomenological approaches (e.g., Chapter 10, by Moser & Kletzenbauer), to name a few examples. The heightened role of the researcher in the process (put differently, the erosion of the boundary between the researcher and the phenomenon under research) also heightens the role of researcher reflexivity, as demonstrated by Costantino in Chapter 5.

While language education research has not been found lacking in either epistemological creativity or pragmatically sensible eclecticism, one challenge that does not seem to have been resolved in a satisfactory way has been the integration of all these perspectives. For this a shared conceptual frame and an interdisciplinary meeting point emerge as essential requisites. Boundary theory (e.g., Akkerman, & Bakker, 2011), which aims at understanding the function of borders and the ways in which they are transgressed, is one candidate for the latter. Regarding the former, Larsen-Freeman (2017) argues that complexity can function as a meta-theory in language education as it provides scope synthesizing different epistemological traditions, whereas the argument has been put forward elsewhere that

complexity can provide a shared discourse space that allows for closer communication between researchers and teaching practitioners (Kostoulas, Stelma, Mercer, Cameron, & Dawson, 2018).

3.3.   Teaching and Learning: Developing as Language Educators

Finally, with regard to the actual practice of teaching and learning, the main challenge faced by the profession relates to the "death of the method" (see Skela, Chapter 2), and the emergence of the postmethod condition (Kumaravadivelu, 1994). To the extent that this development challenges the power imbalances between an authority-providing Center and an authority-dependent Periphery (Phillipson, 1992; see also Skela [Chapter 2], and Stelma & Fay [Chapter 4]), this is a welcome development. However, as Skela points out in Chapter 2, the post-method condition also imposes a burden of responsibility on teachers, for which it is not clear how adequately teacher preparation has prepared them. The same concern can be repeated, *a fortiori*, with regard to the increased demands that expanded forms of pedagogy like CLIL and Global Education are placing on the teachers. Skela is making a valid point, echoing Akbari's (2008), when cautioning against the danger that the autonomy of language teachers is further eroded and devolves into textbook-directed practice.

One potential response to this eventuality would be to increase the agency of language teaching professionals through enhancing their professional competence. Interestingly, two of the contributions in the collection describe professional development programs that aim to enhance the abilities of language teachers to cope with the increasing demands of their roles. Both Chapter 6, by Vourdanou, and Chapter 14, by Kitsiou et al., describe how open and distance learning can support the professional development of language teachers, in ways that do not involve separating them from their professional contexts. In both programs, a critical outlook and reflection are used as means for helping teachers challenge their normative assumptions about teaching, learners, and learning. Developing such skills, which do not focus solely at increasing technical competence, could also be usefully included any similar professional development initiative, even though mismatches between the teachers' and participants' expectations and cognitive frames could lead to alienation or fragmentation (Edge, 2011). A complementary approach to such instructed modes of teacher education might involve self-directed professional development, informed by what Stelma and Fay (Chapter 4) described as a "critical-intentional" stance.

Whether self-directed or instructed, the aim of such professional development trajectories is to create language educators who have an enhanced capability to use the freedom afforded by the post-method condition, in order to shape their professional contexts in ways that are more meaningful to them.

4. Epilogue

Language education is, at its core, a response to the need to connect with other people, those who do not share the same way of encoding the physical and social world around them, or the same way of communicating their insights. It is, in this sense, paradoxical that as the field developed in professionalism, scope, and theoretical depth, such divides have tended to become more accentuated: teachers prefer to keep to the company of other teachers, linguists read the work of other linguists, psychologists attend conferences organized by, and for, other psychologists, and so on. This book has been written as an attempt to better understand, and to challenge such divisions. The twenty-two authors who have contributed chapters to the volume work in several different countries, often other than the ones where they were born and raised; their professional backgrounds encompass an impressive variety of contexts; their thinking is informed by differing theoretical outlooks, and it reflects different methodological preferences. From such variety, a number of commonalities has emerged, including appeals for greater integration, concerns about the social implications of our professional action, and a critical outlook towards the technocratic models of language education.

Such were the outcomes of boundary-crossing contained inside this book. The final act of boundary crossing, however, is yet to come: this involves you, as readers, taking on the input of this volume, and connecting it with your own experience, your own reflections, and your own work. Whether this means adapting, challenging, or building on what you have read, it is hoped that this final act of boundary-crossing will enrich and transform your professional experience.

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