Problematizing “commonsense” discourses of EAL (English as an Additional Language)

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“schooltalk” (Pollock, 2017) is populated with “commonsense” folk beliefs which can be detrimental both within the classroom and beyond

- “commonsense” discourses - “folk views”; everyday beliefs or attitudes about a subject (e.g., folk science, folk medicine)

- discourses have dual possibility of describing and constituting knowledge/understanding about a subject
  - “[Folk linguistic] beliefs may be held very strongly despite a lack of expert knowledge or they may even be in conflict with the current professional position. To ignore such beliefs handicaps the language teaching and learning process at nearly every step of the way.” (Pasquale, 2011, p. 97)

- therefore, critical analysis is necessary as the impacts of these discourses can be detrimental (Kumashiro, 2004; Mayher, 1990)
“I’m not an EAL teacher. I don’t teach language. I teach <insert name of a discipline>.”

- separates language and content
  - “‘content’ in school contexts is always presented and assessed through language. As the difficulty of the concepts we want students to learn increases, the language that construes those concepts also becomes more complex and distanced from ordinary uses of language. Such an understanding implies that focus on language itself is important for helping students learn the concepts of school subjects... all teachers are teachers of language in this sense.” (Schleppegrell, 2004, p. 155; cf. Turkan et al., 2014)

- academic English is no-one’s “native” language
  - i.e., “Science as a second/additional language”, “History as a second/additional language” (cf. Swales’ “discourse communities”)

- **IMPLICATION**: include explicit disciplinary language teaching in every course as teaching language is beneficial to ALL learners (not just EAL learners)
TOEFL, IELTS, and other standardized language tests are accurate predictors of EAL learner success in university. 

- decontextualized language skills and grammatical accuracy are not sufficient for advanced disciplinary engagement (Johnson, Jordon, & Poehner, 2005; Kanno & Kangas, 2014; Seelen, 2002)
- standardized language tests are not strong predictors of academic success (He & Shi, 2008; Simner & Mitchell, 2007; Uysal, 2010)

**IMPLICATION**: relying less on standardized language tests and more on linguistically-situated formative, as well as summative, assessments
A language learner’s linguistic production is reflective of their intellectual ability.

- Language proficiency and production are impacted by a myriad of factors outside of cognitive processes (e.g., identity, investment, and language learning [Norton, 2000, 2013])

- Multilingual ability is often associated with more complex cognition (cf. Jim Cummins)

- **IMPLICATION**: disassociating “language ability” from overall ability and improving assessment validity (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Kubota, 2003; Shin, 2006; Shin & Crookes, 2005)
A language learner’s ability to converse (speaking/listening) in English is commensurate with their ability to read/write in the language.

- Listening and speaking often precede reading and writing
  - BICS versus CALP (Cummins, 1980); but see also Nero (2005) for critiques of this over-compartmentalization
- EAL students are not all “international” nor “immigrants”
  - Heterogenous (versus homogeneous) EAL student population (cf. Ferris, 2009)

**IMPLICATION:** avoiding language “learner” essentializations and understanding diversity of language learning needs
If you speak/write a language (e.g., English), you can teach the language to a language learner.

- ESL is a disciplinary field of inquiry with a robust body of research
- Commonsense beliefs about educational theory and practice can oftentimes be counter to educational research (e.g., “folk” education)

**IMPLICATION:** investing in EAL professional development (e.g., understanding EAL theoretical/pedagogical knowledge) to facilitate disciplinary rhetorical socialization
“Native” speakers of English are the best teachers of English.

- “NEST” / “NNEST” are contested (linguistic) categories (Aneja, 2016; Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 2001; Kabel, 2009; Waters, 2007;

- emphasizing descriptive (based on linguistics) versus prescriptive (based on personal aesthetics) grammar and language (cf. Turner, 2018)

- IMPLICATION: positioning “NNEST”’s as valuable resources (lived experience within disciplinary language learning)
“English Only” environments provide the most effective contexts for learning English.

- immersion and submersion limit, rather than enhance, linguistic strategies and processes (i.e., linguistic repertoires are resources for learning language/content)
- implies EAL students are not legitimate members of the educational community
  - institutional isolation and marginalization contradicts the supports needed for effective language learning and socialization
  - socioacademic relationships: “a category of social interaction with peers and with faculty that proved to be critical to the students’ sense of satisfaction with their educational work and sometimes even to the possibility of doing that work.” (Leki, 2007, p. 14)

**IMPLICATION**: respecting and encouraging multilingual practices and equitable inclusion as essential for successful language learning
Focusing on grammar instruction and grammatical accuracy is the most important factor for language learners’ success in university.

- learners’ needs shift over the course of language trajectory
  - “Knowledge develops in particular contexts related to particular purposes, and the specific context and purposes shape the knowledge, and linguistic resources to construe that knowledge, that students develop . . . Because each discipline has evolved a way of using language that interprets the world in its own terms, students need to learn the language of the different school disciplines if they are to be effective in doing school-based tasks.” (Schleppegrell, 2004, p. 157)

- academic success is not just about academic literacy (reading and writing is often the default/common focus)
  - multiple co-occurring (and nonlinguistic) barriers impacting educational success (Kanno & Cromley, 2013)

- IMPLICATION: recognizing that language learning is a lifelong process rather than a “problem” that can be “fixed” by one-off interventions and error correction
EAL learners want to learn English and are happy to do so.

- some learners want to learn English and some are happy to do so; many, however, are ambivalent about English and are learning the language for reasons that are not always “happy” (see, for example, Lin, 2001; Pennycook, 1995)

- language learners’ “investments” in a language impact their everyday interactions with the language and those who mediate these interactions (Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2001; Norton & Toohey, 2002)

- **IMPLICATION**: understanding that language learning isn’t just about language (it hardly ever is)
English language education is a neutral endeavour.

- Academic institutions are regulatory spaces of language use and language learning (cf. Monica Heller)
  - “Standard English”, monolingualism/linguistic containment, “well-writtenness”
  - “Many institutions . . . have articulated a strong commitment to cultural diversity, socioeconomic equity, and global citizenship. Yet they treat linguistic minority students, who fit quite well with this vision, as institutional aliens. It is incumbent upon us, as teachers, scholar, and activists, to highlight this institutional hypocrisy, and to call for a more ethical and effective treatment of linguistic minority students.” (Shapiro, 2012, p. 252; cf. Harmon & Wilson, 2006; Lea, 2005)

- Language not just about linguistic communication
  - Language and power - marketization, commodification of English (Benesch, 2001; Chun, 2015; Motha, 2014)

- Implication: needing to more effectively support EAL students’ educational experiences and trajectories (i.e., diverse needs, not limited to linguistic, institutional, cultural, financial, health & wellness, etc.)
“commonsense” misunderstandings about EAL education

1) “I’m not an EAL teacher. I don’t teach language. I teach <insert name of a discipline>.”

2) TOEFL, IELTS, and other standardized language tests are accurate predictors of EAL learner success in university.

3) A language learner’s linguistic production is reflective of their intellectual ability.

4) A language learner’s ability to converse (speaking/listening) in English is commensurate with their ability to read/write in the language.

5) If you speak/write a language (e.g., English), you can teach the language to a language learner.

6) “Native” speakers of English are the best teachers of English.

7) “English Only” environments provide the most effective contexts for learning English.

8) Focusing on grammar instruction and grammatical accuracy is the most important factor for language learners’ success in university.

9) EAL learners want to learn English and are happy to do so.

10) English language education is a neutral endeavour.
Thank you!

Questions, comments, concerns, ruminations, observations, lived experiences, and/or??

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