Critical Literacies and Plurilingualism AJAL

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Power, policies, and practices in adult literacies

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Using data collected from a qualitative study conducted with eight experienced ESL/ literacy teachers in Ontario and British Columbia, I found that over the course of their careers these teachers developed a keen awareness of the importance of bringing critical perspectives to their pedagogy, especially in light of how their work related to critical notions of Canadian nation building. The study examined the career trajectories of these teachers as they negotiated the shifting parameters of adult ESL, literacy education and citizenship education. The critical orientations towards ESL/literacy and citizenship that these experienced teachers eventually adopted were no accident.

Critical literacy theory in particular has had an important impact on our field. Morgan and Ramanathan (2005), for example, recommended that teachers adopt a critical orientation towards literacy and “advocate a pluralized notion of literacies and multiliteracies [in order] to help students negotiate a broader range of text-types and modes of persuasion, not only via print, but also sound, images, gestures, spaces, and their multimodal integration (p. 152). Others within this literature noted that pluralized notions of literacy should be viewed as being “socially and historically constructed within particular relations of power” (Norton, 2008, p. 49) and that the goal of looking at literacy in this way is to enhance learner empowerment (Pennycook, 2007).

I examine the findings of the study in light of plurilingualism, which is a relatively new and increasingly popular theoretical framework in second language and literacy education (Vallejo & Dooley, 2020). Plurilingualism has been defined as the recognition of “the existence of a complex or even composite competence [in language usage] on which the social actor may draw” (Coste, Moore & Zarate, 2009, 11). As such, plurilingualism “challenges the assumption of complete and balanced competence in [discrete] languages” and “highlights interculturality and the social nature of communicative competence” (Lau & Van Viegen, 2020, 12). Advocates of this approach emphasize the need to honor the first languages of second language learners, problematize the notion of the native speaker and oppose linguistic racism/linguicism, as originally defined by Skutnabb-Kangas (1981).

Much ink has been spilt in debates regarding how much this framework replicates the previous literature, which in recent years often problematized decontextualized and standardized orientations towards language (such as critical literacies, new literacy studies, multiliteracies and translanguaging).

Moreover, as Ryuko Kubota (2016) has outlined, plurilingualism can be cooped for neo-liberal agendas due to its emphasis on individualism and human capital theory. In concrete practice, the contradictions found within the European Common Framework, which makes extensive use of plurilingualism gives one pause for thought, especially in regard to its attitude towards minority languages.

My manuscript argues that the lessons learnt from experienced teachers can help avoid the pitfalls Ryuko identified. Combining the findings of this study with a literature review on current classroom applications of plurilingualism (Fleming et al., 2024), I argue that the common concerns and viewpoints of actual practitioners must be considered if the liberatory potential of plurlingualism is to be realized in literacy education.