

Megan M. Echevarría (Ed.)

Rehumanizing the Language Curriculum

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A Peace Offering and an Invitation

17 years ago, in light of an apparent language crisis or ‘language deficit’ in the United States (USA), the Modern Language Association established the Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages to examine language and cultural education at the tertiary level (MLA, 2007). The committee observed that universities often maintained a narrow view of language study with a standard configuration¹ consisting of an initial (largely instrumental and inferior) language curriculum that ‘[fed] into a set of core courses primarily focused on canonical literature,’ (MLA, 2007, sect. Transforming academic programs, para. 1) which divisively defined the programme and hierarchically shaped the department governance structure and communication. They claimed the two-tier skills-based/functional language first – literary content later structure of the programme resulted in minimal shared decision making and cooperation and also ‘impede[d] the development of a unified language-and-content curriculum’ (MLA, 2007, sect. Transforming academic programs, para. 2). The committee suggested that departments needed a holistic and integrative approach that equally endorsed the dual goal of ‘deep translingual and transcultural competence’ (MLA, 2007, sect. The goal, para. 1) and, consequently, ‘a broader and more coherent curriculum in which language, culture, and literature are taught as a continuous whole’ (MLA, 2007, sect. Transforming academic programs, para. 3).

This issue was not new in 2007 nor confined to the USA and remains problematic today across various countries, contexts, and levels (e.g., in South Korea where I teach), although Swanson and Levine (2020) report some positive changes. As they and others before them (e.g., Phipps & Levine, 2012) point out, a resolution could help us realize greater potential.

It is thus timely that *Rehumanizing the Language Curriculum* (2023), a volume of ten chapters by ten renowned scholars of various orientations traversing the interconnected expanses of language, literature, and culture, appears as a peace offering, aiming towards transdisciplinarity by ‘resisting anachronistic fragmentation ... with new knowledge and

perspectives from scholars working at this exciting crossroads' (p. 2) and to reinforce the idea that the disciplines are 'convergent, interdependent, mutually beneficial, and genuinely complementary areas of inquiry' (p. 7). This thoughtful compilation of theory and pedagogy, experience and practice through diverse forms of expression (from essays to philosophical pieces to empirical studies) encourages reflection and action on curriculum, especially in language and literature departments.

After Editor Megan M. Echevarría's introductory chapter advocates for a paradigm shift to reconcile the differences above, the vision toward rehumanizing target language education is delivered in three parts, the first on the contemporary role of literature, and the second and third on valuable uses of literature, extending beyond the ideas of input and output, of mere comprehension and production.

Opening Part I in an engaging autobiographical style, Claire Kramersch considers poetic equivalence, 'a bridge between language and literature' (p. 16), as she traces her own illustrious learning and teaching development. She concludes that literary analysis is essential in language education due to the revitalizing role of symbolic competence, an extension of communicative competence.

Then, through anecdotes and exemplification, Guy Cook emphasizes the powerful role of sounds and critically reevaluates 'unfashionable' practices in language classes (memorizing, reciting, and performing poetry), offering practical prerequisites, benefits, and principles for selecting poems and implementing authentic and engaging activities that incite a (re)new(ed) appreciation of the lyrical aspects of language.

Next, Geoff Hall considers identity, inclusion, and the important role of linguistic and cultural diversity through the lens of literary encounters in student-centred language classrooms. He illustrates how fictional genres such as comics, graphic novels, short stories, and novels, unlike most 'tidy,' commercially available coursebooks, afford exposure to and critical dialogue around a plurality of voices and views.

The next three chapters contribute to Part II. Supporting the integration of literary theory and applied linguistics through comparative research and drawing on the German concept of *Verständnis*, Per Urlaub demonstrates that literary hermeneutics and reading research share compatible views conducive to interdisciplinary collaboration and recommends mutual appreciation and goal-oriented exchange to ensure reflective design of linguistic scaffolding and learning environments that make literary content accessible for advanced skills learning.

In turn, Janice Bland embraces deep reading to develop Theory of Mind, intercultural disposition, and extensive languaging in secondary students. She suggests that suitable texts, often in multimedia or hypermedia contexts, lend themselves to creative response as motivated readers engage with texts which work on them, adding to their 'dynamic and multifaceted repertoire[s] of knowledge both of the word and the world' (p. 85). Further, she provides teacher educators with a four-step structure for deep reading, exemplified with a verse novel, before detailing benefits and challenges of using literature with youth.

Elizabeth Bernhardt stresses the importance of opportunities to understand lengthy and complex, 'upper-register' texts. Although hardly practical compared to expository reading, literary reading, she argues, is required to access advanced and superior second language proficiency. After reviewing the latter, she calls for research on text processing, use of upper-register works with language learners, participative pedagogy and assessment, and the connection between literary knowledge and cultural learning.

The final chapters, dedicated to production, develop Part III. Echevarría attempts to reconcile intersecting pedagogies to maximize students' potential. She advocates for 'scaffolded instructional design' (p. 122) and effective implementation of teaching methods in multilevel courses aimed at literary learning, functional communication skills, and intercultural competencies. In particular, she emphasizes a rich variety of empowering (guided and reflective) pre-discussion reading strategies that lend linguistic and cognitive support.

Christian Jones adds a chapter on literary dialogues, appraising their usefulness as conversation models from active teachers' surveyed points of view. Despite methodological limitations, this informative and clearly written qualitative study on pre-use materials evaluation indicates their plausibility and potential for teachers with variable degrees of experience in distinct locations and settings across levels to raise awareness of spoken language and develop conversational abilities when the rationale is explicit and materials and activities are chosen sensitively.

Last, also attentive to oral proficiency, Mark Anthony Darhower and Dawn Smith-Sherwood, in a partnership we might wish to see more of, present their qualitative data-based study on responsive and differentiated integrated assessment of literary competence and interactive performance in undergraduate target language literature courses, emphasizing the teaching of students over texts. Dyads performed tailored tiered tasks and took part in rubric-

informed, co-constructed feedback sessions, resulting in mostly positive washback and helping them develop metalinguistic awareness to push them beyond their current levels.

This volume attempts to unite applied linguists, language educators, literary scholars, and their theories, pedagogies, experience, and practice with languages, literatures, and cultures, to bridge the traditional disciplinary divide described in the opening section. It identifies goals and aspirations, localizes challenges and research gaps, and proposes viable solutions to overcome them. Overall, it is a promising, humanizing gift; not to be judged by its bland cover.

Despite ample merits, this book seems most accessible and immediately relevant to those working at colleges or universities rather than schools. As a reader of *Children's Literature in English Language Education (CLELEjournal)*, I might have hoped for more contents related to teacher education in general and particularly for schoolteachers. More examples of pre-university interventions making use of age- or level-appropriate literature would have been warmly welcomed. Also, this book features contributions by authors who all have rich backgrounds and vast language teaching and research experience, but who are only of Northwestern European and US origins and mainly based in those spaces. Moreover, the focus is on three historically dominant foreign languages (English, German, and Spanish).

These limitations, though, afford regenerative opportunities. It would be wonderful to read follow-up collections including additional perspectives on target language education (whether second, foreign, heritage, or *lingua franca*) to more inclusively represent the evolving complexity and diversity of other linguistic and cultural contexts and approaches for practitioners at the primary and secondary levels. (Re)humanizing the language curriculum is needed across programmes, systems, and the globe for positive action and transformation, starting with teacher education.

Note

¹ Examining 213 language programmes across 35 postsecondary institutions in the USA, Rifkin (2012) empirically supported the claim about the standard configuration.

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