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PREFACE

The manuscript, *Language and culture: Reflective narratives and the emergence of identity* arrived in my inbox on June 11, 2009, as I was in the midst of preparing to teach two summer courses at the University of British Columbia. One course, “Applied Linguistics for Language Teachers”, is a core undergraduate courses in our English Second Language program, and the second, “Language, Discourse, and Identity”, is a graduate course I teach on a regular basis. This serendipitous arrival of the manuscript provided the ideal opportunity for me to reflect on the ways in which the themes in David Nunan and Julie Choi’s edited volume might have relevance for two important audiences in the field of language education: aspiring language teachers, on the one hand, and fledgling researchers, on the other.

As I reflected on the possible impact of the manuscript on both student teachers and emerging researchers, my first observation was that the narrative genre chosen by Nunan and Choi not only makes the volume highly readable and enjoyable, but also serves three important functions at a more scholarly level. First, the autobiographical commentary helps to demystify well-known authors in the field, and gives students greater freedom to debate and critique the ideas presented. Many students come to class believing that the printed word has an absolute authority, and that the role of the student is to absorb and reproduce the ideas of authors on required reading lists. In my teaching, I strive to promote discussion on the ways in which ideas are generated, debated, and disseminated, and this volume will prove an excellent resource in this endeavor. What autobiographical writing does is to humanize authors, locate them in time and space, and invite critical engagement on the part of readers. Indeed, Allan Luke, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, goes so far as to invite readers to “feel free to rewrite” his words. Such an invitation represents both an exciting opportunity and a profound challenge to students.

The second point is related to the first: In adopting a narrative style, authors have written in the first person, and the voice of the writer is highly visible to the reader. Most of the texts that students read in the course of their studies are written in expository, third person style, and as Angel Lin has pointed out in earlier work (Lin, 2004), students

frequently struggle to construct meaning from these disembodied texts. Scholars such as Fairclough (2003) and Janks (1997) remind us that texts written in the passive voice frequently conceal the agency of the writer, and reinforce inequitable relations of power between writers and readers. By writing in the first person, and using the active voice, the authors in this volume establish a more equitable relationship between writer and reader, thus encouraging students to voice their own ideas and to actively engage in meaning-making. If students are to develop as both teachers and researchers, they need a safe space in which to enter into a productive debate with established research, and possibly challenge received wisdom. The authors in this volume have provided the safe haven necessary to promote self-reflection and critical analysis.

The third advantage of the autobiographical, narrative approach, as far as student learning is concerned, is the validation of past history and experience. One of the barriers I encounter in my teaching is that students frequently consider their own history and experience to be irrelevant to teaching and research. This perception is particularly common with students who have few material resources and a history of inequity. The authors in this volume take the opportunity to reflect on their own life histories, with particular reference to language learning, and convincingly demonstrate the centrality of personal experience in their professional lives. Mary Anne Christison, for example, describes how being told by a well-meaning teacher, at the tender age of 12, to “change the way you talk” led Christison to better understand the relationship between language and identity. What is reassuring, as Sumiko Taniguchi notes, is that adverse experiences can not only be analyzed and critiqued, but also transformed: “I kept thinking back and rewriting my AFS story”, she says. Stein’s (2008) research in the South African context serves a model for the ways in which the resources that students bring to the classroom can be re-appropriated and transformed in emancipatory ways.

While the genres of autobiography and narrative are particularly empowering for students, the authors in this volume raise a number of issues that are also highly relevant for experienced teachers and established scholars. Three issues, among many others, concern the identity of non-native language teachers, the relationship between theory and practice, and the distinction between culture and identity.

In recent years, there has been much interest in the role of the non-native teacher in language education, particularly in the field of English language teaching (Braine, 1999; Liu, 1999). This has led to debates on legitimacy in the field of language teaching, a topic of interest to a number of authors in this volume. Kimie Takahashi, for example, who learnt English at school in Japan, describes how all writing and presentations at her two-year college had to be “checked and approved by native speaker teachers from the UK, US, Canada or Australia”. This system, Takahashi argues, engendered the belief that it was the native speaker who was legitimate, and the non-native speaker who had “no authority”. Of particular concern in the field is the effect of covert and overt forms of racism on language education (Kubota & Lin, 2006), and the association of the native English speaker with someone who is White. Eljee Javier, a native speaker of English of Filipino descent, describes in her chapter how her Chinese students were “confused” by her appearance, and assumed she could not be a native speaker because she looked “Chinese”. It was only when Javier told the students that she was from Canada, that they (reluctantly) accepted her credentials. To support her arguments, she draws on Liu (1999), who noted that one of the participants in his research, a Ms. K, was seen by her students as a native speaker of English because she was White, despite having been born and raised in Denmark until the age of 10.

The relevance of theory to address these problems of practice is another important theme of great interest to teachers and researchers. For example, with respect to the legitimacy of non-native teachers, Julian Edge notes how he draws on Cook’s (1999) research on multicompetence, and Pavlenko’s (2003) research on the bilingual language teacher, to inform his practice. What Edge finds particularly powerful is the innovative pedagogy that Pavlenko uses, in which she encourages language teachers to re-imagine themselves as multicompetent and bilingual, rather than as deficient speakers of a second language. Stacey Holman Jones, another contributor to this volume, writes of the ways in which Foucault’s (1988) theories of the panopticon and disciplinary power led to an enhanced understanding of women’s visibility in contemporary society: “The air in the room changes. I am pulsing with recognition”, she writes. Her visceral response to this theory is reminiscent of my own reaction to reading the poststructuralist theories of Christine Weedon (1997), while still a graduate student at the University of Toronto; her

work on subjectivity was pivotal in my own evolving theories of identity as a site of struggle, changing across time and space, and reproduced in social interaction (Norton, 2000). There are multiple ways in which poststructuralist theories of identity are relevant for practice: if a student fails to thrive, the teacher is encouraged to consider what alternative identity positions might prove more productive for the learner, encouraging engagement from a position of power rather than powerlessness (Norton & Toohey, 2004).

This then brings me to the distinction between culture and identity, an issue raised by David Nunan, and of great interest to teachers and researchers alike. In the 1970s and 1980s, applied linguists tended to draw distinctions between social identity, which was seen to reference the relationship between the individual language learner and the larger social world (e.g., Gumperz, 1982), and cultural identity, which referenced the relationship between an individual and members of a particular ethnic group, who share a common history and language (e.g., Valdes, 1986). Today, as evidenced in this volume, distinctions between social and cultural identity have blurred, and identity is often framed as multiple and conflictual. Nevertheless, the remnants of more essentialist notions of identity, which frequently equate identity with culture, or ethnic identity, remain remarkably resilient. Thus Emi Ohtsuji, for example, expresses her embarrassment at assuming that students are from a particular country only because their family name sounds Chinese, or because they can speak Cantonese, and she seeks to address these problematic assumptions in her pedagogy: “I am trying to teach students that they should not stereotype Japan and that the relationship between language, nation state, cultural identity, and ethnicity is fluid,” she writes. From a different perspective, Julia Choi’s narrative, which represents a quest for connection to her Korean culture, is all too familiar to mobile students, teachers, and researchers in many parts of the world. Is it possible to embrace multiple identities, while simultaneously seeking a “home” and a place of belonging?

As I prepare for my summer classes, I am challenged to find ways to validate the ethnic identities of students, but also to respond to their gendered identities, their socioeconomic histories, and their sexual orientations. I will also strive to encourage students to engage critically with the written text, to take ownership of their ideas, and to

claim their voices as members of our global profession. To this end, *Language and culture: Reflective narratives and the emergence of identity* will be essential reading in my classroom.

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