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Please cite this publication as follows:

Kullman, J. (2017) Review of Dasli. M. and A.R. Diaz (Eds.) 'The Critical Turn in Language and Intercultural Communication Pedagogy: Theory, Research and Practice'. Language and Intercultural Communication. ISSN 1470-8477.

Link to official URL (if available):

<http://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2017.1340416>

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Book Review

The critical turn in language and intercultural communication pedagogy: theory, research and practice, edited by Maria Dasli and Adriana Raquel Díaz, London, Routledge, 2017, 233 pp., £95.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-138-95345-1

This edited volume is the fifth in the Routledge Studies in Language and Intercultural Communication series, and comprises three sections on ‘Theorising Critically’, ‘Researching Critically’ and ‘Teaching Critically’, each containing four chapters, as well as a prologue and epilogue. The varied and thought-provoking collection of chapters challenges us to think out of the box in relation to what a truly engaged ‘critical’ and ‘intercultural’ approach might imply for the educator and researcher and what it might mean in practice.

In the prologue Dasli and Díaz discuss what they mean by ‘the critical turn’ and how in recent years a more nuanced understanding of ‘culture’ derived from anthropological ethnography has influenced language and intercultural communication pedagogy and research. They outline, too, interpretations and uses of the term ‘critical’ in different intellectual traditions and academic disciplines that have been drawn on in attempts to develop an engaged ‘critical’ intercultural language pedagogy.

Section 1 starts with a useful account by the editors of how issues of culture and intercultural communication have come to the fore in language pedagogy since the 1980s. They outline debates concerning ‘essentialist’ and ‘non-essentialist’ perspectives on cultural identity, as well as highlighting how models of intercultural competence have developed to embrace ‘criticality’ and ‘cosmopolitanism’ in an attempt to ‘develop ‘critical’ intercultural beings capable of actively engaging in a dialogue that transcends boundaries’ (p. 15). The transcending of boundaries is a key motif in the book and for Liddicoat language pedagogy has the potentiality to achieve this by drawing on the tenets of Habermas on the emancipatory potential of learning (1968) and by applying Swain’s notion of ‘languaging’ (the ‘process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language’ (2006:98)). Liddicoat provides samples of researcher interviews with learners of French and Japanese at Australian universities in which learners are encouraged to critically reflect on pragmatic features of language (one interview involves a learner of French being encouraged by the researcher to discuss the socio-cultural meanings and resonances of ‘tu’ and ‘vous’). For Risager transcending boundaries should be informed by theorists who have written on globalisation and ‘transnationality’ (Appadurai 1996), ‘cultural flows’ (Hannerz 1992), and on how we need to move beyond the nation state in our coming to an understanding of the contemporary world (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002). She discusses how this can be done in an English lesson in a Danish secondary school in which learners are encouraged to investigate the ideologies that underlie different representations of Scotland. Dervin concludes the section with a discussion of how the field of intercultural communication tends to continue to suffer from a lack of truly engaged criticality despite developing a more sophisticated theoretical base that has embraced theories of ‘culture’ and ‘interculturality’ from a number of disciplines. This is most evident by the tendency to neglect

or overlook power relations. A truly critical interculturality for Dervin 'requires that we not only question the concepts we use but also problematise our own beliefs' (p. 63). We can be helped in this process by what he calls 'simplexity' (a combination of simplicity and complexity), through which we recognise that we will all inevitably 'navigate between simple and complex ideas and opinions when we interact with others' (p. 66). He concludes by setting out three principles for applying 'simplexity' in intercultural pedagogy: 'systemic questioning of the words, concepts and notions we use' (p. 69), encouraging learner perspectives that move beyond the individual towards how discourses and identities are co-constructed, and training learners to questions 'truths' by exploring beneath the surface of discourse.

A particularly interesting theme in section 2 is how far researchers in intercultural communication should take a strong non-essentialist stance. A strong reaction to essentialism has been a feature of the field in the last two decades, with the result that any smack of essentialism can be branded as heresy. Yet Zotzmann questions whether such a stance can account for cultural difference and similarity, for attachments by individuals to different cultures, and for how cultural practices, achievements and institutions can remain stable over time. She argues that we need a critical realist perspective that accounts for how social, economic and political structures and contextual realities of particular social worlds impact on interactions between individuals. It is the neglect of power relations in a non-essentialist perspective that Manathunga explores in her chapter on intercultural doctoral supervision at an Australian university. She advocates a 'moderate essentialism' that involves exploring with doctoral students 'problematic binaries' like Northern/ Southern, Western/ Eastern and indigenous/ non-indigenous, as well as the 'broad macro historical, social, political and cultural context' that might impact on the doctoral supervision relationship. Her chapter reminds us that doctoral research itself involves for many a transcending of boundaries and an initiation into a community of practice with its own particular and peculiar cultural discourses. Power relations are also a concern of Holmes, who identifies a key issue with much published research into intercultural communication that is carried out in English even when this is not the first language of the researched. This not only raises ethical issues (issues little touched on in much literature on intercultural research) but also affects the relationships and interactions between the researcher and the researched (which are also little acknowledged in much literature in the field). In light of her discussion Holmes revisits her own doctoral research that involved the intercultural experiences of ethnic Chinese students at a New Zealand university. In the final chapter Fay and Stelma outline how students on MA TESOL and Intercultural Communication programmes at a UK university are encouraged to develop 'criticality', 'ecological interdependence' ('the mutual relationship between an individual / group and their environment') and 'intentionality' ('being purposeful') (p. 130) in a small-scale pilot study with ten clearly defined steps and the keeping of a research journal. They highlight the journal entries of one student and conclude by calling for programmes to do more than presenting students with 'opportunities to learn about and discuss critical perspectives' by encouraging them towards 'critical action' (p. 135).

Authors in section 3 present practical ways in which criticality can be engendered in language and language teacher education. In her review of case studies in language teaching in Europe and Australia Crozet finds little depth of thinking of what intercultural pedagogy might involve and how it might be implemented, and concludes by calling for greater collaboration between researchers and teachers. My own experience as an English language teacher educator has led to

increasing unease with the lack of serious attention to interculturality and criticality in language teacher education and the chapter by Moloney and Oguro on how to encourage a critical intercultural pedagogy in pre-service language teacher education at an Australian university is especially pertinent. This involves student teachers producing narrative reflections on their intercultural encounters, finding links between their own intercultural learning and selected academic literature, and considering the place of intercultural learning in their future teaching. Different levels of intercultural learning are evidenced in extracts from the students' narratives and the authors suggest extending the use of reflective narrative tasks to the teaching practicum. Literature has been a much neglected resource in many language classrooms in recent years as a result of concerns about cultural imperialism and the mantra that pedagogic materials should be close to the lived experiences of the learner. It is heartening, therefore, to find that literature is the focus of chapters by Kennedy, Díaz & Dasli and by Yulita. In the former the writers provide an interesting discussion of how 'cosmopolitanism' has been adopted from various branches of the social sciences to become a key educational aim and proceed to describe how learners of Italian at an Australian university are encouraged to explore cultural diversity through the choice of topics and how they are framed, meeting up with Italian speakers in the local community and the study of a story set in Cairo and a multicultural district of Rome by a writer who was born in Algeria and now lives in Italy. Yulita explains how she bases a module for Spanish learners at a British university on an Argentinian short story about two women from impoverished backgrounds in Buenos Aires. In an attempt to encourage critical intercultural awareness of gender identities learners produce a series of texts related to issues raised in the story. Yulita demonstrates how initial student responses to the story often reflect neo-essentialist otherising ideologies which can be uncovered and deconstructed in the classroom.

In the epilogue the editors emphasise how human consciousness can lead to individual agency and the potential to counter powerful contemporary discourses of neo-liberalism. They conclude by advocating an 'alternative version of criticality' (p. 221) that draws on the notions of 'conditional' and 'absolute' hospitality in the work of Derrida and Dufourmantelle (2000) and invite the interculturalist to 'reflexively adopt open alternatives' and to 'think outside the boundaries of convention' (p. 226).

This edited volume provides rich food for thought for those involved in researching issues of culture in language learning and communication and for those looking for inspiration and practical ideas on how to encourage a truly engaged critical interculturality in language pedagogy. How to implement the 'critical turn' in a way that has real impact remains a major challenge for many at a time when dominant discourses of culture and identity are ever more powerful.

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