

UC Riverside

Issues in Applied Linguistics

Title

Dialogic Approaches to TESOL: Where the Ginkgo Tree Grows

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/38b585b8>

Journal

Issues in Applied Linguistics, 15(2)

ISSN

1050-4273

Author

Wang, Chuang

Publication Date

2007

DOI

10.5070/L4152005085

Peer reviewed

Dialogic Approaches to TESOL: Where the Ginkgo Tree Grows by Shelley Wong.
Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006, 248 pp.

Reviewed by Chuang Wang
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Teachers of English have always been looking for effective ways to help English language learners (ELLs) learn English. While there are numerous texts and guides to teaching English, *Dialogic Approaches to TESOL: Where the Ginkgo Tree Grows* is a must for teachers. Reflecting upon 30 years of teaching and research, the author provides practical examples and resources (including lesson plans and authentic teacher-student dialogues) throughout the text to show how to use dialogic pedagogy by using students' home languages and cultures, families, and communities as resources to enhance learning.

Clifford Prator (1979), a professor of Wong's at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), discusses three foundational questions for TESOL methodology that guided the development of this book: (i) what is the nature of the language?; (ii) what is the nature of the learner?; and (iii) what are the aims of instruction?, which Wong critiques. For example, Prator (1968) considered only British and American English as "standard English" and was against the use of local varieties of English (e.g., Indian English). Wong claims that Prator was unable to understand the implications of colonialism in teaching English due to the limitations of the time period when his work was published. Enlightened with recent anthropological and sociological theorists such as Bruner, Wong argues that all varieties of English are equal and English should be taught as an additional language rather than as a substitute of the home language.

Wong illustrates four features of dialogic approaches to TESOL with examples she used when teaching three Chinese theological students in New York City: (1) *Learning in community*; (2) *Problem posing*; (3) *Learning by doing*; and (4) *Knowledge for whom*. *Learning in community* encourages a diversity of voices within the classroom and addresses how teachers can facilitate dialogue and assess student contributions. *Problem posing* encourages teachers to identify meaningful and important questions about students' lives and reasons for studying English. *Learning by doing* calls teachers to reflect on the classroom practices and use English for real-world communication. *Knowledge for whom* is a question that reminds teachers of inequities for the oppressed and disadvantaged people in the society.

Through analyses of traditional teaching method(s) in current language classrooms, Wong addresses practical questions, theoretical frameworks, and valuable resources for pre-service teachers or teachers who are in the early stages of their careers and want to bring critical multicultural and multilingual perspectives into language arts, reading, and literacy education. Teachers who dare to lead in im-

plementing dialogic approaches will challenge the official discourses of power in current school systems as language is a practice that constructs and is constructed by the language learner's social surroundings (Norton & Toohey, 2004).

The book begins in Chapter 1 with a history of TESOL methods, from the grammar translation approach to the communicative approach and the natural approach. Distinguished linguists, anthropologists, and psychologists reviewed in this chapter include Hymes, Halliday, Saussure, Chomsky, Boas, Bloomfield, Bakhtin, Dewey, Bourdieu, Krashen, and Vygotsky. Chapter 2 covers early dialogic approaches, the Socratic method, and Confucius philosophy for teaching and learning, and then addresses dialogic learning in the community, focusing on how teachers and students can learn from each other with humbleness.

Chapter 3 defines problem posing in the context of high-stakes testing and encourages both teachers and students to be engaged in situated social practice and reflection. Distinguished from Bandura's (1986) social cognitive perspectives where children learn through internalizing the model's strategies, this feature of a dialogic approach is close to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural perspectives where children are active agents and develop their own strategies through interaction in meaningful social and cultural activities.

Using the Chinese characters for *student*, which consists of two words: *learn* and *growth, alive, or life* (p. 116), Chapter 4 emphasizes the practical application of theory. Scholars who were strongly influenced by Karl Marx are discussed with respect to learning by doing: Freire, Bakhtin, Vygotsky, and Mao. Dewey's theory of experiential education and the comparison between Dewey and Mao's perspectives on the centrality of learning by doing are also discussed.

Reflecting Dubois's concept of "double consciousness" and many works on critical discourse analysis (e.g., Pennycook, 1994), Chapter 5 raises the issues of language loss and assimilation. These issues are particularly important; due to colonialism, English has been considered the language of the elite/White Americans. This belief is so widespread that a university in China refused to offer an English language teaching position to an Asian American (Shao, 2005), and most immigrants in the United States lose their heritage language within two or three generations (Ovando, 2003; UCLA Steering Committee, 2000). Chapter 6 returns to Prator's (1979) three cornerstone questions and concludes that dialogic pedagogy includes all students in the teaching and learning processes and leaves nobody behind.

The examples provided throughout the book are very helpful for teachers to understand how dialogic approaches are used in practice; nevertheless, more examples representing recent international students in broader contexts would be valuable. For example, most Chinese international students in America in the 1980s were supported by their institutions or the Chinese government. Today, however, international Chinese students in America are often supported by their families or themselves. In addition to the cultural and language barriers, financial needs might also become part of the language learning context. Another shortcoming of the book is the glossary for Chinese characters and/or pinyin used in texts. While

these glosses are very helpful for providing background information for the reader, more detailed information, especially related to Chinese culture and recent history, would be appreciated.

This book is a much needed response to Dong's (2004) plea for cultural awareness and sensitivity in the classroom with a large number of immigrant students. It makes a significant contribution to the TESOL world by asking teachers to appreciate the knowledge and experience that students bring to the classroom. TESOL scholars, educators, and practitioners will find it a valuable resource tracing the history, philosophy, and methodology of dialogic approaches and how to use dialogic pedagogy in the classroom.

REFERENCES

- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Dong, Y. R. (2004). *Teaching language and content to linguistically and culturally diverse students: Principles, ideas, and materials*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age.
- Norton, B., & Toohey, K. (2004). Critical pedagogies and language learning: An introduction. In B. Norton & K. Toohey (Eds.), *Critical pedagogies and language learning* (pp. 1-20). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ovando, C. J. (2003). Bilingual education in the United States: Historical development and current issues. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 27, 1-24.
- Pennycook, A. (1994). Incommensurable discourses? *Applied Linguistics*, 15, 115-138.
- Prator, C. (1968). The British heresy in TESL. In J. Fishman, C. Ferguson, & J. Das Gupta (Eds.), *Language problems in developing nations* (pp. 11-30). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Prator, C. (1979). The cornerstones of method. In M. Celce-Murcia & L. McIntosh (Eds.), *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (pp. 5-16). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Shao, T. (2005). Teaching English in China: NNESTs need not apply? *NNEST Newsletter*, 7(2). Retrieved September 5, 2007 from http://www.tesol.org/s_tesol/sec_issue.asp?nid=2982&iid=4633&sid=1
- Steering Committee. (2000). Heritage language research priorities conference report. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 24, 333-346.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.