

DISCURSIVE PRACTICE IN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING.

Richard F. Young. New York: Wiley, 2009. Pp. 267 + xii.

By making discursive practice rather than, say, communicative competence or intercultural communication the center of attention in language learning and teaching, this book shows language learning to be more than just the acquisition of linguistic forms and their referential meanings. It is also more than the acquisition of communicative strategies and intercultural pragmatics. Drawing on scholarship in anthropology (Malinowski, Hymes, and Sahlins), philosophy (Wittgenstein, Austin, and Searle), social theory (Goffman and Bourdieu) and French poststructuralism (Althusser, Foucault, and de Certeau), Young makes the argument that learning another language is in fact performing and constructing social realities and participating in meaning-making games in interaction with others. Discursive practice is practice in context, defined as “the network of physical, spatial, temporal, social, interactional, institutional, political, and historical circumstances” (p. 2), in which second-language (L2) learners negotiate identities and subjectivities. Through language and other semiotic systems, L2 learners learn how to adapt to a new culture and participate in a new community of practice, even if this is often only a school community. The approach taken in this book is that of practice theory, defined as “the construction and reflection of social realities through actions that invoke identity, ideology, belief, and power” (p. 37). As such, it falls on the socialization end of the SLA-L2 socialization continuum that has been debated in applied linguistics in the last 15 years.

This volume offers an extremely useful state-of-the-art survey of essential research in applied linguistics and discourse studies with which every language teacher should become familiar. After an enlightening discussion of how various disciplines have conceptualized context in chapter 2, chapters 3 and 4 lay the empirical foundations for a practice approach to language learning, teaching, and testing. In particular, chapter 4, “Discursive Resources,” gives a clear account of

Goffman's participations framework, of Halliday's systemic functional analysis, and of conversation analysis to understand what might be going on in language classrooms. Chapter 5, "Language Learning and Discursive Practice," draws on two learning theories—language socialization and situated learning theory—to show that what is learned is not only language but also ways of acting, feeling, and believing. In other words, learning and using a L2 "involves a battle for subjectivity in a new community" (p. 7). Chapter 6, "Contexts of Teaching and Testing," discusses the effect of ideology, societal politics, and institutional power on pedagogical practice. The last chapter returns to the book's main concern—namely "the processes by which ideologies created in different languages create different identities and the degree to which individuals can resist the power of ideology over their cognition or can reject the languages in which they are expressed" (p. 229).

The book ends on an intriguing metaphor that sums up the general thrust of Young's argument. According to Young, discursive practices are not strategies that can be memorized in class and then deployed in real life but instead are like the moment-by-moment tactics of a foreign visitor as he or she walks through a city, map in hand, seeking high vantage points to get a good view. De Certeau did precisely this in 1984 when he visited New York and went up to the 110th floor of the World Trade Center. "Today," says Young, "the vantage point is no more" (p. 233). This rather sober ending reminds readers that discursive practices and the construction of a L2 subjectivity are an endless struggle against the power of ideologies to impose road maps on the developing multilingual individual. However, it is good to remember that a foreign language, by its unexpected emotional power and affective resonance, can bring to the mind's eye inordinately more powerful invisible cities with their eye-opening vantage points. Language teachers can help learners access these landscapes of the heart by encouraging them to enter into discursive practice not only with L2 speakers but also with L2 poets and artists in the invincible realm of the imagination.

(Received 10 January 2010)

Claire Kramsch
University of California, Berkeley