

## EDITORIAL

### THE INESCAPABILITY OF LANGUAGE: THEORY AND PRACTICE FOR L1 EDUCATORS

Special issue of *L1, Educational Studies on Language and Literature*

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#### 1. CONTEXT

In June, 2011, a three-day Special Interest Group (SIG) got together during the *International Association for the Improvement of Mother Tongue Education's* (IAIMTE) biannual conference held in Hildesheim, Germany, to discuss L1 teacher education. As joint-chairs of this Special Interest Group, we accepted the challenge of guest-editing a special issue of the IAIMTE's Journal, *L1*, in which we would try to push the conversations held during that SIG forward.

Soon after the conference, we brainstormed some questions the SIG sessions prompted and agreed that, by guest editing the Special Issue, we wanted to achieve a deeper understanding of *how language educators construct and further develop their epistemology of practice in and through the situations in which they work from day to day*. In our initial conversations, we found ourselves to be especially interested in deepening our knowledge about *the ways language (the content of L1 research) features in the professional learning of L1 teacher educators (i.e. as*

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*the form that that research might take*). From the SIG sessions, we knew that there were potentially relevant answers to be learned from those who had taken part, but we also put out a call for others to join in. By putting out a call for papers, we found ourselves embarking on an inquiry of our own into the research that L1 teacher educators see as appropriate to their specific focus of inquiry.

We believe that the collaborative inquiry developed among us, as guest editors, in dialogue with the contributors as they have written and responded to the various critiques made of their papers, has indeed brought us relevant insights in response to the questions that we initially posed. In this editorial, we wish to share these insights with you, by briefly elaborating on the justifications, procedures, main learnings and open areas of inquiry that this unique research opportunity has allowed. By doing so, we shall also introduce the texts that make up this special issue.

## 2. WHY THE INESCAPABILITY OF LANGUAGE?

The impulse behind our specific inquiry might be said to derive from our sense of an increasing mismatch between the ways standards-based reforms construct language teaching and learning and the full dimensions of our work as language educators.

We are working at a time when significant changes have occurred in the way language and literacy education and professional learning are conceived. Governments are attempting to intervene in language and literacy education by mandating standardised literacy testing, as well as supporting international literacy testing (e.g. PISA and PIRLS) that supposedly ranks the performance of each country. The primary motivation behind such reforms is said to be a desire to give all children access to literacy (e.g. the US 'No Child Left Behind'), and yet this gives rise to assumptions and practices that are deeply concerning to language educators, most notably the promotion of a reductive version of literacy as simply an individual cognitive ability that can be measured without regard to the specific nature of the cultures and communities in which young people grow up and the literacies that are anchored in those communities. A similar move is happening with teachers' professional learning, in the form of standards that supposedly apply to all teachers, regardless of where they might be working. Such reforms treat the socio-cultural contexts of schooling as amorphously alike throughout the whole world, as though they are no more than "blank and receptive national surfaces" (Jones, 2010), reflecting a logic of 'sameness' that "trivialises and tramples on diversity" (Van de Ven and Doecke, 2011). These reforms have typically been justified as evidence-based, though the research methodologies and epistemological assumptions that produce such 'evidence' are disturbingly narrow. The philosophical basis of such standardised testing is never made explicit, and the assumptions behind standardized testing are never open to question. We appear to be caught up in a circular logic that won't allow us to question the validity of preconceptions that

underpin measurement of this kind, such as the very notions of 'improvement', 'effectiveness', 'literacy' and the construction of 'reading' and 'writing' reflected in standardised tests.

In contradistinction to this kind of generalising mindset, the diversity of presentations and discussions that were held during the SIG in Hildesheim provided clearly situated instances of language education research that conveyed a strong sense of both the researchers' voices and the voices of educators and pupils who participated in the research projects they were reporting. By and large, they appeared to be openly speaking against the current international orthodoxy imposed upon language and literacy education. The thought occurred to us that L1 educators are potentially counter-hegemonic agents in this era of uniformity, working against the grain because of their mindfulness of the socio-cultural nature of language and the way that it mediates human relationships and the experiences of people as they enact their cultures anew each day.

This realisation confirmed our resolve to call for contributions to this Special Issue that might enable us to deepen our understanding of what we hypothesized to be the specific character of the inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009) *of language educators in developing their epistemology of practice in and through the situations in which they work from day to day*. We wanted to gather contributions that might further sustain our claim that language educators (practitioners and researchers) might be characterized as belonging to a discourse community that is resisting the globalising imposition of standards-based reforms due to their sensitivity and disposition towards *the inescapability of language* both in terms of their pedagogy and their research.

### 3. ON THE EDITING PROCESS

The editing process went for far more than a year. As guest editors, we initially cross-commented on the abstracts and on each of the first drafts, bearing in mind the main aim of the issue. The e-mail conversations we exchanged in this initial phase actually multiplied our preliminary ideas and prompted us to engage in reflection of a more philosophical nature, producing an essay that we published in *Changing English*. This focused specifically on Walter Benjamin's ideas on language and experience as providing a framework for understanding what we were doing (Doecke and Pereira, 2012).

When we received the results of the blind peer-reviews, we decided to actively mediate the insights and suggestions made about each paper to the contributors, so that the issue would be as coherent as possible. We would like to thank the reviewers for the challenging insights they offered into the papers we assembled – insights that contributed to our own intellectual growth through editing this issue.

#### 4. MAIN CONTENT LINES IN THE CONTRIBUTIONS

The articles assembled for this special issue have empirically sustained our claim about the *inescapability of language* in the *construction and further development of language educators' epistemology of practice* in two relevant ways. We found evidence about (i) language educators' awareness of the complexity of language as *a subject of professional inquiry and learning*, as well as evidence about (ii) their awareness of the role of language *as a form of research and learning*. In one way or another, all the articles show language teacher educators to be providing an alternative way of thinking to the standards-based orthodoxy that prevails at the moment.

##### 4.1 *Language educators' awareness of the complexity of language as a subject of professional inquiry and learning*

Teachers' sensitivity towards the complexity of language as a subject of learning and practice is to be found:

- in the form of an acknowledgement of the salience of traditional forms of conceiving language education. This is illustrated by the discussion of the notion of *Bildung* in the Nordic countries and the way it conflicts with current policy relating to standardisation, which can be found in Ellen Krogh's paper as well as in Kjersti Lea's paper. However, it can also be sensed, though in a less explicit manner, in the difficulties that Taiwanese teachers face in improving their standards due to their traditional educational conceptions and practices, as reported by Shek Kam Tse;
- in the form of an acknowledgement of teacher's cultural profiles, biographies and emotions in their professional learning. Peter Medway's historical research reports "a radical realignment in the relationship between speech and writing in the pedagogy of English in a London school in the 1950s and 1960s" and lets us know that such a profound reconceptualisation of language education was carried out by teachers who were 'intellectuals', teachers who were well informed about the changes in politics, theory and culture that were happening and who were committed to theorising their own professional practice. Besides Medway's text, the relevance of teachers' biographies in their practices and learning is also discussed in Lea's as well as in Iris Pereira's paper. Through Lea's discussion we realise how teachers' enactment of their professional practice can hardly be captured by formal standards, and that an ethically informed reflexive praxis is at the heart of their professional lives. Pereira analyses a case that shows how a teachers' learning is consciously constructed by revisiting her past practices and conceptions, as a lived enactment of her professional identity. The 'knowledge' she is talking about is inextricably bound up with experience, as it is lived and breathed, not simply learnt from books (much as

Bakhtin (1981/1987) says that one does not learn new words from a dictionary, but from other people's mouths).

The research and essays that we have just referred to highlight the diversity of languages and cultures, illustrating teachers' acknowledgement of their own situatedness and individuality, thus helping us perceive how language educators are unavoidably 'pushed' to carry on their learning from within such diversity. The picture we get from reading these texts is therefore in marked contrast to that of the uniformity in the processes and products of teacher learning assumed and prescribed by current political trends. Standards-based reforms are radically undermining the status of teachers and teacher educators as entities, with their own biographies, values and emotions, working within specific cultural and intellectual traditions, reducing them to the role of non-historical-non-emotional-technicians who apply knowledge derived from elsewhere. In the majority of these texts, we hear the voices of educators who are aware of this tension, but the research presented in Krogh's and Medway's papers seems especially pointed in this respect. Many of the testimonials that Krogh presents are particularly interesting because they show the present-day difficult relationship that some practitioners are having with the notion of 'literacy' as it is being imported into their countries from abroad and how they are actively positioning themselves against this trend by invoking richer understandings of language and culture. Medway's critique of the current moment takes the form of a reconstruction of an historical moment when language educators were able to develop a robust sense of themselves as intellectuals, the implication being that "something *did* happen and therefore *can* happen" again in the future.

#### *4.2 Language educators' awareness of the complexity of the role of language as a form of inquiry and learning*

Language educators' sensitivity towards the complexity of language as a powerful instrument of professional learning is evidenced by the diversity of forms of inquiry that are reported in the papers. They assume the form of conversations, either of a local character (e.g. in Medway's, Tse's, and Pereira's papers) or of a virtual one (e.g. Ana Pinho and Ana Simões' paper). In all these, oral and written forms of language are used to promote teachers' learning.

These papers allow us to deepen our understanding of language as a form of inquiry. In them, we find exemplary instances that show language being used to sustain teachers' conscious reflections about their knowledge and practices. Furthermore, we also find evidence of how inquiry through language (or reflexive learning) is experiential in nature, grounded in the situations in which teachers work, and how it is inherently social, grounded in the context of diverse communities of practice. Through these papers we realise the fact that a community of practice is crucially a language community, a space where people talk, engage in dialogue, and in some cases go away and write down their thoughts and feelings in an

effort to take their learning further. This is especially well developed by Pinho and Simões' paper, but it applies to most of the essays assembled here.

As far as we see, each of these cases illustrates forms of research in contradistinction to the uniform and supposedly measurable processes of learning as prescribed by the current political trends. Cultivating a reflexive awareness, including sensitivity to the language or discourse that one is using in order to inquire into one's situated experience is a way of pursuing and giving form to modes of professional learning that resist being reduced to the same scale of measurement. In the texts we have referred to, we hear the voices of practitioners who are conscious of the role that language plays in their learning, presented by researchers who are likewise self-consciously using language to inquire into each of the issues they discuss.

## 5. OUR LEARNING

We believe this editing process has brought empirical support to our claim that language educators are aware of the inescapability of language in the construction and further development of their epistemology of practice. The evidence that we get daily shows many instances where teachers are engaging in continuing inquiry into the situations in which they find themselves. In our opinion, the articles that constitute this Special Issue provide important empirical and theoretical evidence for this claim.

It is also worth emphasizing the way that the papers assembled here show a diversity of research settings, contrasting policy environments, different objects of inquiry, theoretical assumptions and (central) concepts, divergent research perspectives, methodologies, findings and voices. And this is so, even though all the international contexts presented are currently being subjected to similar pressures towards standardisation and globalisation, including the use of English as a global language.

The editing process thus allowed us to realise the construction of teachers' epistemology as coming from within (and not from the outside) of their own situated experience by a process that is conditioned by the 'reflective-creative' use they are able to make of language. As far as we see them, each of these cases reveals how teachers are consciously working inside language, conceiving it as integral to the process by which they make sense of their (professional) lives. In fact, by guest-editing this special issue we have learned to recognize language educators who construct:

- varied epistemologies of practice (heterogeneous/singular/multifocused);
- varied epistemologies of practice from situated experiences of language education, in and through the situations in which they work from day to day;
- varied epistemologies of practice by telling a story about a teaching situation and a meta-story about that story, revealing an effort to use reflection to go into those teaching situations in search of complexity, letting us hear their

voices theorize about the experiences they report, thus cultivating within themselves a sensitivity towards the complex pathways that everyone follows in their efforts to understand and act on the world as they find it;

- varied epistemologies of practice by telling a story about a teaching situation and a meta-story about that story through language, which is not just any sort of language, but their own forms of professional language.

We are also lead to conclude that there is a need to look cautiously into the current context of teachers' learning, that is, into our own reality, specifically into the worldwide discourse, which urges the 'preparation' of students and teachers in order to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One of our most important reflections concerns the importance of persevering against such an "only apparently altruistic discourse" (Doecke and Pereira, 2012), which affects students and teachers equally, as both are 'spontaneously' lead to construct an epistemology of their own within a unified frame that is politically constructed for them.

## 6. OPEN SPACES

Our discussion above is based on our claim about language educators' sensitivity towards language as mediating experience and knowledge and the repercussions that this claim has for the way we see the current context of professional practice and learning. Our editorial work has been directed towards bringing the best evidence for this out of each contribution and we hope that, by writing this editorial, we have prompted you to take the discussion forward.

Now that this exercise is finished we still have questions to ask, which are more clearly defined now than when we started the editing process. One such question focuses on language educators themselves: *How far extended is this sensitivity towards the inescapability of language in professional learning among language educators?* After all, we have based our discussion on a few cases only. Another question widens the lens to include other teachers of other subjects: *How sensitive to the inescapability of language in professional learning are other educators?* We have assumed L1's awareness to be the hallmark of language educators themselves, but we wonder whether this means that other educators are not aware of that too, as all of us crucially make use of language as mediating our professional learning.

These questions can perhaps be addressed at the next meeting of our Special Interest Group, which will be in Paris in July 2013.

## PAPERS IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

- Krogh, E. (2012). [Writing in the literacy era: Scandinavian teachers' notions of writing in mother tongue education](#). A contribution to The inescapability of language, a special issue of L1, guest edited by Iris Pereira and Brenton Doecke. *L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature*, 12, pp. 1 -28
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