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Note

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CONCLUSION

Faith and SLA: An Emerging Area of Inquiry

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The primary motivation for bringing together the current volume was the desire to go beyond ideological and belief-based claims concerning the interaction of religion and language and to generate firm insights into the actual role that faith plays in various aspects of the language learning and teaching experience. We were interested in soliciting studies that met international research standards and that produced findings with sufficient internal and external validity. The final collection of papers in this volume is the outcome of careful selection and several rounds of editing, and as a result, the quality of the chapters is compatible with that of similar anthologies in other applied linguistic areas. Given that, as David Smith describes in Chapter 10, research on faith and language teaching and learning is still in a “nascent state,” we hope that the research base and the rich content displayed by the contributions will offer a significant boost to future investigations in the field.

Because this volume contains three review chapters—one after each main section—that discuss the specific papers in detail, we would like to use this concluding chapter to reflect on some general issues that have arisen from the material in this book. The fundamental question to consider is whether we can talk about “faith and language learning and teaching” as a distinct research domain. While the term “faith” is used widely in everyday parlance and most people would have no problem understanding the meaning of the word, it is not

entirely straightforward to define what aspects of faith are to be examined in relation to the language learning process. The notion of “integrating faith and education” is admittedly rather vague and has been understood to imply diverse educational practices (see Smith’s analysis in Chapter 10) and therefore it is instructive to observe how the various authors have interpreted faith as a mediating factor in their studies.

As already mentioned in the introduction, the richest vein in this respect has been the examination of how faith beliefs influence Christian teachers’ identity formation and, subsequently, their educational practices. Incorporating faith-based beliefs in a research paradigm that is centered around the self-construction of language practitioners lends itself to exploring how teachers’ faith identity informs (or does not inform) their practice. One analytical framework discussed in this volume is Wenger’s social theory of identity construction (see Wong, Chapter 2 and Ding, Chapter 12). The concept of teachers traversing through and negotiating various (and sometime conflicting) Communities of Practice was found to be useful in identifying and describing the teachers’ emerging sense of professional identity. As Smith observes in this volume (pp. 154–164) and develops elsewhere (2011), Wenger’s theory can help get at a “richer” picture, one that is more integrated or holistic, that helps us take into account institutional context, individual beliefs, and pedagogy, when exploring teachers’ practices. Smith notes:

Practices are not so much actions unilaterally directed by beliefs as complexes of belief and action in which forms of participation, reification, imagination, and repertoire interact (Wenger, 1998); as such they both complicate the picture and offer a rich context within which to consider the role of faith in pedagogy (Smith & Smith, 2011).

(Smith, Chapter 10, p. 162)

In future research, Wenger’s theory could be applied to explore the relevance of faith in teachers’ practices in multiple ways and contexts, such as at different stages in their professional journeys (novice to experienced), in different types of institutions (such as institutions that encourage faith to those who seek to minimize its expression) and in different cultural contexts, just to name a few.

While the relevant studies in this book provide valuable insights into the complex relationship between professional and faith-based identities from the perspective of teachers, future research could potentially be enhanced by also including student voices in the research designs, following the proverbial principle that the proof of the (educational) pudding is in the eating (by students). In other words, future studies could investigate how students’ appraise the way their teachers put their religious beliefs into practice. An interesting question in this respect is whether students would identify the special contribution of committed Christian teachers merely as indications of professional values or whether they could also sense the outworking of the teachers’ spiritual identity in their language classes

and what impact this might have on their learning. Related to this is the question of implications for learner agency (Duff, 2012; Kristjánsson, 2013; van Lier, 2008), and possibilities for investigating how spiritual agency on the part of teachers and learners might come to bear on conditions, behaviors, and perceptions of significance that to date have been understood in terms of social agency (for example, Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, pp. 238–240).

An intriguing aspect of the data concerning the formation of teachers’ professional Christian identity is the salient developmental aspect, that is, the complex, dynamic, and interconnected relationship between the teachers’ faith-specific and education-specific selves. It becomes very clear in some of the chapters that the interaction is not only monodirectional—that is, the teacher’s Christian beliefs shape and enhance their professional awareness and practice—but bidirectional, with the Christian self also maturing in the process as it is nurtured and deepened by the teachers’ growing perceptions of themselves as language educators (see Maggie Kubanyiova’s analysis in Chapter 6). This dynamic conceptualization is in full accordance with the current intellectual shift towards dynamic systems perspectives in applied linguistics (for example, Dörnyei, 2009; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). The challenge for researchers posed by the adoption of this perspective is, according to Kubanyiova, to develop systematic research programs that enable them to construct multi-layered and textured portraits of “who Christian language educators are, where they come from, and what they are striving to accomplish in their interactions with their students, teaching partners, colleagues, and their students’ parents” (Chapter 6, p. 89).

A complex systems perspective is also relevant to studies that aim to examine language learning within specifically Christian learning situations such as Christian higher education institutes and church-based teaching programs. A key tenet in contemporary linguistics is that language has a fundamentally social function, but while most scholars would agree that the individual’s experience in the social environment affects every aspect of human functioning, including language acquisition and use, how this actually happens is a hotbed of disagreement among social scientists. In psychology, this dispute has often been referred to as the “person situation debate,” and a Focus Issue of *The Modern Language Journal* (Lafford, 2007) has articulated well the current tension between cognitive and social agendas in applied linguistics (for good summaries of the cognitive-social debate, see Larsen-Freeman, 2007; Zuengler & Miller, 2006).

With respect to Christian language education, the three chapters that specifically target learning situational issues (Chapters 7–9) make it clear that the nature of the institutional context, the approaches adopted to the integration of faith and learning, and the methods for putting faith beliefs into practice are in constant interaction with each other, allowing for a variety of permutations and outcome options. This diversity is not surprising given that we also find significant variation in the kind of Christian self-images that believers form on the basis of the perception of their own faith, and therefore the various ways by which people

might try to approximate these self-images is bound to represent a wide scope. All this implies that future research on “Christian language education” will need to go beyond the use of holistic metaphors and employ, instead, precise definitions of specific aspects of what makes the learning environments in question distinctively “Christian.” In fact, the need for well-defined metaphors also applies to the study of teacher identities: for example, as Kubanyiova points out, seemingly well-known notions such as being “called to teach” will need to be unpacked more fully because they may have a rather different meaning for teachers with diverse past histories (both professional and Christian), working in a range of educational, sociocultural, and geographical contexts.

The dynamic systems perspective is reflected most explicitly in the final set of chapters (Chapters 11–13) that use motivational concepts to understand how Christianity has affected the research participants’ language-related behavior. All these studies utilize Dörnyei’s (2005) L2 Motivational Self System as a starting point, as it specifically focuses on the interaction of multiple identity dimensions, but at the same time all three chapters attempt to elaborate on this motivational construct in light of the data. As Ema Ushioda points out in Chapter 14, a common feature of the three chapters is that the qualitative descriptions of the participants highlight the interactions among various elements in their self systems and their evolving interactions with factors in the surrounding social environment. This, as she goes on to explain, underlines the inherently social nature of language motivation as a key determiner of the integrated nature of the participants’ language learning, personal, professional, and religious-vocational motivational self-systems. The theme of interaction and integration is, in fact, the focal issue of the concluding study in the book by Letty Chan (Chapter 13), and her analysis of four committed Christian language educators demonstrates the dynamic interplay of various aspects of faith-based and professional beliefs in shaping who we are and what we do (or do not do) in our pedagogical practice.

A final point we have already mentioned in the introduction concerns what is *not* included in the book. There is, for example, a general absence of linking faith-based beliefs with concrete teaching approaches and learning mechanisms. We are aware of the danger that lies in reducing the rich complexity of identity, behavior and belonging encompassed by praxis to isolated actions and behavior in the classroom (see Smith, Chapter 10). However, while it is important to recognize this complexity and expand our investigations and theoretical understandings of the relationship between faith and the learning and teaching of language, this emphasis must not overshadow our need to also understand the specific related conditions and characteristics that converge in the outworking of effective faith-informed classroom interaction. One potentially fruitful research agenda in this area might outline optimal combinations of educational factors that are conducive to fully utilizing the benefits of faith beliefs. Are there certain approaches, materials, and learning formats that would be particularly fitting for Christian language learners in given situations? Are there any teaching strategies

and techniques that would be particularly suitable for bringing out the best of Christian educators in different contexts? These are some of the very practical questions that we need to answer in a systematic manner and based on situated evidences of best practice if we wish to make the spirit of this book relevant to a wide range of practitioners.

Also missing in this volume is a discussion of other faith beliefs on language education. As noted by Wong and Canagarajah (2009), this dialogue and research would be enriched if we were “to extend [it] to other faith traditions to move beyond the focus on Christianity and to explore how other ideologies, faiths, and religions influence teaching and learning, and the identities of teachers and students” (p. 291). What can be learned from a study of the impact of Buddhist teacher identity on teaching and learning, or of an Islamic identity or of any number of other faith traditions? How is the impact similar and how is it different? What is the effect when students are of the same faith background as the teacher, and what is the impact when faith backgrounds are different? What is the impact when faith is of great importance to the students, for example, but not the teacher, or vice versa?

In sum, there is a lot of food for thought in the chapters of this anthology. They present genuine practitioner voices and insights, ambitious attempts to extend a rigorous research methodology on the study of the interaction of faith and second language acquisition, promising embryonic theories to explain the uniqueness of the “Christian” data, and a wide range of relevant literature which outlines a substantial corpus that is much larger than most of us would have thought—all in all, we believe that this is a good start! In light of the findings presented here there is no need for any further justification that faith can impact both the teaching and the learning of languages in a decisive manner; thus, the domain of “faith and SLA” is a valid research strand and for some people a highly intriguing one at that. We join Suresh Canagarajah in hoping that the conversations generated by this book will “go beyond the faith-based community and inspire the whole profession to systematically study the way in which faith and the values of diverse traditions can shape learning” (Foreword, p. xxiii).

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