

UC Berkeley

L2 Journal

Title

A Response to Navarrete, Licata, Szarke, Lawton, Kim, and Bellezza: Confessions of a Structuralist

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3r48q0nw>

Journal

L2 Journal, 13(1)

Author

Kaiser, Mark

Publication Date

2021

DOI

10.5070/L213153101

Copyright Information

Copyright 2021 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

A Response to Navarrete, Licata, Szarke, Lawton, Kim, and Bellezza: Confessions of a Structuralist

MARK KAISER

University of California, Berkeley
Email: mkaiser@berkeley.edu

In this response I will follow Ignacio Navarrete's lead and begin with a personal recounting of how my views on the knowledge base of language instructors have changed during my years of teaching Russian and running the day-to-day operations of the Berkeley Language Center.

When I was in graduate school (early 1980's), the makeup of the department where I did my graduate work very much resembled the departments Gabriella Licata describes in her essay: seven professors specializing in literature, one in film, and two in Slavic historical and comparative linguistics, but no applied linguists. The department was heavily anchored in Russian formalism and Prague School structuralism, and although my concentration was in Slavic historical linguistics, I still was required to take several literature courses. The one course in pedagogy was taught by a specialist in 18th-century literature, from which the only thing I remember was creating substitution drills and cloze exercises—a mixture of grammar translation and ALM, a far cry from the training Margot Szarke describes in her essay. At the time I graduated, had you asked me what a person needed to know to teach Russian, I would have replied a knowledge of the language (meaning grammatical forms and an extensive vocabulary) and some knowledge of the literature. Thinking back now, I am not even certain whether I could have clearly stated whether the structures and vocabulary were taught in order to read the literature, or the literature was to provide examples of the structures and vocabulary in context. Literary analysis of passages of text were focused on forms, not unlike Dominick Lawton's reading of the Gippius poem, but unlike Lawton's treatment, that is where my classes' analysis ended.

In my first tenure-line position at a “second-tier” state university, I was the only faculty member in Russian, directed the Russian Studies program, and was expected to teach an introductory course on Russian civilization in addition to a variety of language courses. This required that I conduct a deep dive into Russian history, politics, art, music, and Soviet/Marxist economics. Although the students in the civilization course were ill-served by my lack of expertise in these areas, my students in Russian language classes benefited from all the ancillary materials that I encountered as I prepared the civilization course and that inevitably ended up in my Russian language classes, whether in the form of readings, images, or film. At that point in my career, if asked Claire's question about what the knowledge base for language teachers should be, I would have stated a knowledge of the language, the literature, and the broader culture.

When I belatedly was exposed to the communicative method and started to see the affordances of computer technology for drilling grammatical form and denotative meanings

of vocabulary, I modified the curriculum I was teaching to maximize communication in the classroom and drill work outside of it via computer exercises. When I arrived at Berkeley, I worked closely with Lisa Little to create a computer-based formative assessment program in the first four semesters of Russian, which allowed students to take chapter tests multiple times on computer, with feedback provided before they took the second or third version of the exam. Although we extensively incorporated audio into these exams, they remained oriented to a mastery of grammar and vocabulary. I would heartily agree with Minsook Kim's argument that knowledge of technology is *sine qua non* for language instructors, both as a medium of communication and as a source of information or texts, perhaps even as a mechanism for mastering form. It is probably the case that without Zoom technology, language education would have come to a halt during the pandemic, but we are only beginning to assess the impact of teaching by Zoom on language acquisition. Today, as we prepare to return to classroom teaching in a few months, one hears a variety of views, ranging from a desire to be back fully in person and to do away with technology as much as possible, to advocacy for the benefits not only of remote, but even asynchronous language teaching. In the ongoing struggle over the place of technology in language instruction, we cannot lose sight of the fact that as a medium, computer technology imposes on both instructor and student an ideology and a particular notion of what language is that seems incompatible with the process of negotiating meaning in face-to-face communication or of understanding textual semiosis.

When we first began developing Lumière (at the time called the Library of Foreign Language Film Clips, or LFLFC), I employed a pedagogical rationale that scenes from films could be used to model conversation and sociocultural practices, since we as viewers of films in our native language suspend disbelief and perceive those conversations as "real" even knowing that those are composed dialogs, practiced by actors, and shot multiple times. In my intermediate Russian classes, students would act out the same scenes they had watched and whose language they had studied. I was struck by their enthusiasm: They would bring props unprompted and spontaneously play with the text to change the meaning of the scene. When acting out scenes, they tried to imitate the actors; when discussing scenes, they sought to understand a character's motivation. It seemed to me that these scenes were impacting students' identity and bringing cultural differences to the fore. I came to appreciate Annamaria Bellezza's pedagogy of performance, although she proposes a model much more dynamic and more grounded in a multiliteracies framework than what I had attempted to do in my classes. I also began to look at film not as model of conversation or cultural practices (again, structuralism), but rather as a constructed text, where filmic devices (setting, lighting, camera work, transitions between shots and scenes), gesture and facial expression, music, and language work together to create a meaning that is as much physical and emotional as it is cognitive.

In the fall of 2020, we surveyed language instructors (n=41) and tenure line faculty actively using BLC services (n=19). Lecturers represented a range of years of teaching experience at Berkeley, with 14 having less than 6 years, 11 having 6-12, and 16 with more than 12 years. The last section of the survey asked, "Please indicate which areas of knowledge you find essential to be an effective language instructor." Possible responses were "Essential / Important / Useful / Marginal." Results are summarized below in Table 1, with conflation of the top two responses and the bottom two responses.

Table 1
Responses to a survey question on what lecturers need to know

Field	Response	By Lecturers	By Tenure-line Faculty
General tech	Essential/Important	98%	100%
	Useful/Marginal	2%	0%
Sociolinguistics	Essential/Important	90%	75%
	Useful/Marginal	10%	25%
SLA theory	Essential/Important	90%	92%
	Useful/Marginal	10%	8%
Current social trends	Essential/Important	90%	75%
	Useful/Marginal	10%	25%
High culture (literature, film, art)	Essential/Important	90%	67%
	Useful/Marginal	10%	33%
Popular culture	Essential/Important	85%	83%
	Useful/Marginal	15%	17%
Colloquial language	Essential/Important	85%	75%
	Useful/Marginal	15%	25%
Politics & history	Essential/Important	72%	67%
	Useful/Marginal	28%	33%
Narrow tech	Essential/Important	70%	25%
	Useful/Marginal	30%	75%
Commercial language software	Essential/Important	25%	18%
	Useful/Marginal	75%	82%

With one exception, there was broad agreement between lecturers and tenure-line faculty. Both groups overwhelmingly cite knowledge of general technology (word processing, spreadsheets, the campus's LMS), sociolinguistics, SLA theory, high culture, and social trends as essential or important, with lecturers rating a knowledge of high culture, social trends, and sociolinguistics of somewhat greater import than the professors. We see some divergence between lecturers and professors when it comes to colloquial language, perhaps due to a greater emphasis the latter place on academic forms of the language, as Gabriella Licata notes in her reflections, and an even greater distance between the two groups on the need to know "high culture" (turf wars?). The only glaring difference between the two groups is on narrowly focused technology (e.g., databases, image or video editing, animations), which may be because

tenure-line faculty are unaware of the extent to which language instructors are engaged in manipulation of media.

Thus, lecturers are reporting that knowledge in many disparate fields is essential, and in my view these knowledge areas are necessary, but not sufficient for successful language teaching. Two other skills, or rather mindsets, are necessary, namely reflexivity and the ability to make connections.

Language instructors are shaped by the ways they learned languages. As graduate students we are exposed to different theories of what language is and what it does and how it should be taught. In my case, I learned to see language as structure and teaching language meant teaching structures. And yet, I recognized in my students and their reactions to a film clip or a poem, that language was much more. And it was through reading Kramersch and Kern, van Lier and Norton, Bakhtin and Byram, that I was able to find a framework by which to question my assumptions about language and language teaching. And this cannot be a one-time occurrence, but rather must be an ongoing process of reading in applied linguistics and reflecting on what that means for language teaching. To answer Claire's question today, as I near retirement, I would say that the essential field of knowledge for language instructors is applied linguistics, and so I concur with Ignacio Navarrete's predilection to seek language instructors with deep knowledge in applied linguistics.

However, this, too, is not sufficient for inspired language teaching. Theories of language teaching and a deep understanding of what language does will not suffice without creativity and the ability to make connections: to see the resistance that some students have to a gendered language that calls into question their identity and to address that by bringing to class a poem where the author plays with gender in the language (Dominick Lawton); to find grammatical structures being taught in class on chip bags and then having students create their own on-product advertising, or using a local art exhibit as a prompt for a writing assignment (Margot Szarke); to construct a curriculum that meets the interests of students and reflects their particular needs as heritage learners (Minsook Kim); to advocate for structural change in departments after recognizing the ties between department structure and curriculum and the disconnect with student interests and abilities (Gabriella Licata); to make connections between theory and practice and to apply the issues relevant in society today to classroom teaching through a performative pedagogy (Annamaria Bellezza). The creativity and the ability to make connections comes about through interaction with fellow language instructors in places like the Berkeley Language Center.