

"WHERE THE PLAY ENDS": THE TESTING REGIME AND CONSTRAINTS ON BEST PRACTICES FOR ELLS

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INTRODUCTION Although language teacher cognition research is now well established (Borg, 2015), the interplay of cognition with playful approaches to second language teaching and learning has not been extensively examined. This project is part of an ongoing exploratory case study of high school English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers. The teachers were interviewed once and, in two cases, observed. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Fairclough's (2003) application of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to the social sciences.

TEACHER COGNITION The study of teacher cognition, or what teachers "think, know, believe, and do" (Borg, 2003, p. 81) informs researchers about how teachers make decisions. Scholars agree that what teachers believe, know, and do are not interrelated linearly (Borg, 2015). That is, "tensions" may arise as teachers encounter issues in their context, with their content, or even within a particular class that result in practice diverging from knowledge or beliefs (Freeman, 1993). Contextual factors such as testing, curriculum, supervision, or students' expectations mediate the extent to which teachers practice their principles (Golombek, 2009).

PLAYFUL TEACHING AND LEARNING Playfulness can be a form of appropriation in which individuals "[t]ake over a situation to perceive it differently" (Sicart, 2014, p. 27). Some have argued that playfulness is missing from teaching and learning in US secondary schools though it may be vital for development of twenty-first century skills (Fine, 2014). More playful approaches may also be a path toward increased engagement for culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students. Play may, in fact, work as a foil for the prevailing testing culture, for, in approaching a task or project playfully, a teacher or student reclaims power to shape their world and to imprint their voices in spite of the constraints of the system. Put another way, to play is to humanize.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

→Do "tensions" emerge in teacher's talk about implementing a more playful pedagogy?

→What does the linguistic structure of the tension-related talk reveal about tensions in teacher cognition vis-à-vis playful learning and teaching?

PARTICIPANTS

Teacher 1: Title I high school, ESL teacher and supervisor; White, forties; 15 years experience.

Teacher 2: Title I high school, ESL and ELA teacher; Black, twenties; 3 years experience.

Teacher 3: ESL teacher, Newcomers program; urban high school; White, thirties; 13 years experience.

REFERENCES Borg, S. (2003). Teacher cognition in language teaching: A review of research on what language teachers think, know, believe, and do. *Language Teaching*, 36(2), 81–109. / Borg, S. (2015). *Teacher Cognition and Language Education: Research and Practice*. Bloomsbury Publishing. / Fairclough, N. *Analysing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. Psychology Press, 2003. / Fine, S. M. (2014). "A Slow Revolution": Toward a Theory of Intellectual Playfulness in High School Classrooms. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 123–135. / Freeman, D. (1993). Renaming experience/reconstructing practice: Developing new understanding of teaching. *Teaching and teacher education*, 9(5-6), 485–497. / Golombek, P. (2009). Personal practical knowledge in L2 teacher education. In A. Burns & J. Richards (Eds.) *Personal Practical Knowledge in L2 Teacher Education. Cambridge Guide to Second Language Teacher Education* (pp. 155–160). Cambridge University Press.

1: I think our society under **No Child Left Behind** is so tied to standardization, and everybody being the same and meeting the same standards and meeting—being the same. **And so**, I don't think as a society right now, we value creativity. Um, and I don't think as a society that we value, like—we talk about critical thinking and rigor, but we don't really do that, and we don't, I don't think, really expect that of our students, **so**, to me, it's not really surprising that they go to college and they don't know how to think critically or creatively because all they've had to do is don't know how to think correctly or creatively. **And** that's always the goal, for the same answer correctly the questions for that test. **And** that's always the goal, for the same test [...] Like, we're all supposed to be working on the same standard at the same time. **So**, our idea of differentiation is only about how you differentiate how kids approach that standard. We're not all working on different standards. It's all over that one standard. **So**, how playful can you really be? I don't think it was ever about play. **It** was still about efficiency to learn that standard. **So**, it's work, it's not play.

EXCERPT FROM INTERVIEW WITH TEACHER 1

1: Can you say more about that? How do you feel constrained by curriculum? In terms of providing more play?
2: I think that, in the four years of high school, by the time they leave, we are getting them ready for college, **so** that they can be on the same level as their peers at other schools and in other states. Uh, but it's also kind of a weird concept expecting them to be college ready. The test is like, very rigorous. The things we have to read in class are rigorous things that they would expect a college-educated person to be able to decipher and um, make inferences from, but they're expecting it out of fourteen-year-olds. Um, I think the fact that that, unfortunately, a lot of all these things in to get them ready for it—a test in a year rather than "this is what's going to make a well-rounded student," or something like that.

EXCERPT FROM INTERVIEW WITH TEACHER 2

3: It's not as bad as you think. I should share the **T-TESS** with you. Are you interested?
1: Your evaluations? Yeah. [...]
3: **So**, either, you suck or you're amazing. And **no one's** ever amazing anymore [...] But look, everything supposed to be student-centered, I mean, the rigor, everything. **So**, if you want to be amazing, everything has to be student-centered. Where students are bringing their own questions?
1: **So**, are we talking about, like, inquiry-driven would be the ideal? Where students are bringing their own questions?
3: Every dimension. Your planning has to be student-centered. Your class environment
1: **So**, are we talking about, like, inquiry-driven would be the ideal? Where students are bringing their own questions?
3: **So**, **no**, they want to see interaction. They want to see kids up and moving around. They do want to see discussion. And we're getting there. It's gonna take some time. Like, it's too much. Like, all the technology. Like, you got to give me time to figure it out. **So**, I'm still doing PowerPoint.

EXCERPT FROM INTERVIEW WITH TEACHER 3

ANALYTIC METHOD CDA offers a framework through which to link the micro-analysis of linguistic features (i.e. placement of clauses) to macro-analyses of culture or hegemonic global ideologies (i.e. neoliberalism). Fairclough (2003) suggests that CDA's close examination of language in conjunction with other qualitative approaches delivers the rich, multi-layered data valued by researchers in the social sciences. My application of Fairclough's framework to the discourse of these three teachers during an interview with me (a Ph.D student, white, female, thirties, 15 years of ESL teaching experience) progressed as follows: 1. Two rounds of coding on transcripts (open and thematic) to reveal tensions (see Borg, 2015) in teachers' talk; 2. Locating "intertextuality" (see Fairclough, 2003) within tension-revealing talk as a unit of analysis for testing vs. beliefs-specific (that is, about play) tensions; 3. Analysing intertextual tension-talk (additive and elaborative markers for co-hyponyms, nouns/pronouns, and modal verbs)

FINDINGS: THE INTERTEXTUALITY OF COGNITION

Fairclough (2003) discusses "intertextuality" in which texts may "draw upon, incorporate, recontextualize, [or] dialogue" with other texts (p. 17). Here, teachers draw upon and dialogue with outside texts (policy, tests, evaluations protocols) as they weigh the place of play in US high schools. As they do so, they align and differentiate the content of the documents with their cognition around playful pedagogy.

In **Excerpt 1**, the teacher created equivalency with NCLB and "standardization" and "everybody being the same and meeting the same standards." Later, she attributes low expectations and general failure to prepare students for postsecondary success to NCLB's priority of "everybody being the same"; this, she contrasts with another list of equivalencies—creativity, critical thinking, rigor, and differentiation, as well as her thoughts on the possibility of playful pedagogy. (Does she mean that current educational policy is primarily concerned with conformity and will constrain efforts to design instruction that transgresses the goal of "everybody being the same"?)

In **Excerpt 2**, the teacher reports what they expect of her students as evidenced by "the test." Her pronouns build equivalencies (what "they expect") among the concepts of college preparation, rigor and "get[ting] them ready for [the test] in a year"; through the expression "rather than," she contrasts what "they expect" (also what "we're supposed to do") with building "well-rounded students." (Does she imply that play would figure into the latter endeavour?)

In **Excerpt 3**, the teacher draws on the current evaluation protocol in her district. Her pronoun use also builds a narrative of what "they" expect teacher to do. She equates student-centered instructions with interaction, discussion, movement, and technology. She partially aligns her practice with the new expectations but, dialoguing with the document, demands time to "figure it out." (Is she appropriating this document's language to help her define and to align her practice toward what she constructs to be more playfulness?)

IMPLICATIONS FOR PLAYFUL TEACHING

The intertextuality of these three excerpts suggest that teachers make meaning from texts connected to education, whether local or national, and that the message they receive from those documents is may create tension in their cognition. These teachers seem to construct their beliefs, experience, and practice in dialogue with any number of actual or figured texts. Thus, any decisions about implementing more playful teaching will be measured against various texts that define what is permitted or at least preferred in terms of classroom practice. For teacher education, this may mean that pre-service teachers should be given opportunities to critically reflect on educational policy in order to better assert their agency later. Further research might consider exploring which texts surface in teachers' talk about their instructional decisions, how teachers make meaning of those texts, and the nature of the interaction with their overall cognition