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Researching Language-Based Teaching: Walking the Walls of our Thinking

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Abstract
In this essay, I use the title to organize an argument about the particular—and possibly unique—place of researching second language teacher education in educational research more generally. The argument rests on two points. First, rather than simply applying methods to problems, researching is a process of taking a position both epistemologically and ontologically. Second, because language plays a unique role in how we experience our lives and worlds, it plays with usual ways of thinking and organizing educating teachers. Basically, we are positioning ourselves conceptually and practically in this havoc through the ideas we use as researchers and teacher educators in second language teacher education. As building blocks of our thinking, these ideas categorize and organize how we design and conduct studies and how we develop and implement teacher education activities and programs. In so doing the ideas create possibilities as well as blind spots, a process which I refer to here the 'walls of our thinking'.

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Researching-- "*Something there is that doesn't love a wall*"

On one level, the process of doing research can seem fairly straightforward: It starts with a problem or phenomenon in the world—a research focus— to examine and then you decide on a means to study it. In this formulation, research entails applying methods to study problems; it is such a commonplace idea that we hardly even think about it. When we read or hear about 'advances in research' that have led to this or that discovery, we take for granted the logic that there is some aspect of the phenomenon out there in the world waiting for 'advances' in research methods to make discoverable (Law, 2004). The assumption is that phenomena in the world are transformed into knowledge by means of research. The world is objective and even though our ways of understanding it are mostly subjective, the rigor, methodicalness, and replicability of research practices can equip us with stable understandings. This

view serves us well in many instances, from our everyday lives for instance when the traffic app on our phone provides information on which routes to avoid because they are congested, to research findings about diseases that lead to the production of new vaccines. In this sense, applying research practices to the world helps to make life better at the same as it extends understanding and ways of thinking.

If you consider the process on another level though, it quickly becomes more complicated. What if research is not so much a process of application as one of creation? Creating according to certain agreed-upon norms. Seen from this perspective, the research methods we use in studying a problem or phenomenon create the version that we study. If this statement sounds tautological, it is. Researching is a tautological undertaking—in both the best and the worst senses. In the best sense, we need a version of the focus in order to study it, and that version is contingent on—and indeed delimited by—how it is represented. Think about a traffic app on your phone: It captures and represents a version of traffic which is defined by the amount of congestion. Similarly, scientific definitions of disease are central to the researched prescriptions which address that disease, so biologists study a physiological and chemical version of depression, while psychiatrists study a social and emotional one.

Like any definitions, these research foci circumscribe and direct the phenomenon. Congestion is understood as the number of vehicles using that route. The traffic app doesn't include how weather, or perhaps construction several streets away, is part of what is happening. We understand that depression has both physiological and psychological dimensions which converge in the experiences of individuals. These parameters shape how the particular way of looking defines what we are seeing. The limits are simultaneously operational and consequential: We need them to take action and to get things done even as they shape the world in which we are acting.

There is a verse in Robert Frost's poem, Mending Wall, about two neighbors who are walking the stone walls that mark their property lines. This is a common spring ritual in northern New England where Frost lived to mark and repair where walls have fallen down in the winter's snow. As they walk, Frost's narrator muses about mending the walls:

> Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
> What I was walling in or walling out,
> And to whom I was like to give offense.

Frost's words offer a useful image in the context of this argument. The landscape in northern New England is full of rocks, some of which, over time, have been piled into

these stone walls. In spring, neighbors walk these borders to mend the walls because, as Frost concludes: "Good fences make good neighbors." Similarly, in researching we use ideas as rocks to define the focus of our studies, and these definitions organize possibilities—they 'wall in' some ways of seeing what we are studying and 'wall out' others.

This raises a very reasonable question in the context of this new journal: How does this argument particularly touch on researching second language teacher education? Why make it in a journal that focuses, as the inaugural editorial says, on documenting and understanding "the development of effective, equitable, and contextually relevant [second language] teacher education practices."? Partly it is because the world we live in and experience tends to resist categorization even though we need categories to make sense of it; as Frost puts it, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall". Language is the main way in which we attack this resistance, and through which we categorize the world.

Language-Based Teaching: The Pedagogical Tautology of SLTE

Second language teaching actually distills how language organizes our experiences of the world. In researching "relevant [second language] teacher education practices", language appears twice, as the content and simultaneously as the means by which that content is being taught. Unlike other forms of teaching, in second language teaching we turn *what* we teach—language—into *how* we teach it—in language. Which is as tautological as it sounds. In this sense, ours is a language-based pedagogy. The pedagogical injunction to teach the language *in* the language-- for example 'to teach English *in* English'— which was foundational to communicative language teaching, has shaped our view of second language teacher education for the last half century. The admonition is a socio-political rock, anchored in the ideology of nativespeakerism. Dividing "teachers as separate speakerhood groups", as Holliday (2017) puts it, has been—and continues to be—a way to wall in, and thus to privilege, some teachers while simultaneously walling out others according to where they were born and raised (e.g. Snow, 2017). Other than teaching second languages, I can think of no form of teaching in which a teacher can be seen as being born into the content they teach (Freeman, 2016).

This pedagogical tautology of language as content and means goes to the heart of second language teaching. Inasmuch as it defines the teaching to be done, the tautology is at the heart of second language teacher education. One simply needs to look to the international policy environment in which many countries define the English language proficiency they expect of classroom teachers in their national systems in terms of the general proficiency framework of the CEFR. These are policies

that *de facto* equate English proficiency to classroom teaching ability. The underlying assumption is that using language is using language, notwithstanding the specific circumstances of that use. In this view, managing a classroom and talking about what you do in your free time depend generally on knowing similar types of language. But what if they don't? What if the circumstances are actually more critical to 'successful' use than the language exemplars themselves? Think about the classroom. An English learner is more likely encounter a phrase like 'Now turn and talk to your partner' as part of their experience as a student than to be taught the phrase explicitly in any lesson. This phrase, and many like it, are the language that people use for the specific purpose of classroom teaching, but they don't map easily onto a general proficiency framework.

An argument can be made that conceiving of language content in terms of general proficiency as the CEFR does, generally serves the classroom learning needs of many students. Certainly, national curricula and transnational assessment schemes are organized on that assumption. However, it is worth examining whether this same way of thinking serves the language needs of second language teachers in their classroom teaching. We have argued elsewhere (Freeman et al., 2015) that a specific-purposes view is better suited than general proficiency to conceptualizing the language that second language teachers use in their classrooms. It turns out, however, that this argument touches on what we could call the 'third rail' of SLTE. (In American political discourse, the phrase refers to programs—primarily social security-- that are politically dangerous to cut or reduce.) The idea comes from subway lines in which the trains run on two rails and are powered by the electricity in a third. Because it carries high voltage, this third rail is 'hot', it is very dangerous and should not be touched.

It turns out that describing language use in terms of general proficiency is just such a third rail. SLTE depends on defining content in this way so challenging the idea of proficiency risks unending the whole enterprise. The idea that the language of the lesson content and the language used in teaching that content can be conceptualized through general proficiency is so widely embraced that it is taken for granted as foundational in educating and in researching second language teachers. It seems to me intellectually lazy for the SLTE community to operate from an unexamined given that students and teachers use the language in the same ways in the classroom. Alternatively, we could frame the students' language-- the content of the lesson-- in terms of general proficiency while framing the teacher's language—how the content is being taught-- in terms of the specific purpose in teaching. Certainly, as we walk the walls of our thinking, we may want to re-examine some of the rocks that make up those walls.

The point here is twofold. First-- and most basically-- It is essential for the second language teacher education researchers, like any research community, to acknowledge Frost's observation about what they are walling in and walling out. The editorial in this inaugural issue ends by listing questions to be considered in studying SLTE, all of which seem reasonable points of departure in extending our understanding of what we do. At the same time however, these questions are built upon certain givens; ideas like expertise and efficacy in teaching, or distinguishing methodology and content in lessons, or students coming from mono- or multi-cultural backgrounds. These ways of thinking support, and thus wall in, certain ways of approaching the particular research focus; at the same time, they wall out others ways of approaching that focus. Take the idea of effectiveness in teacher professional development for example. My own work has dug into what I have called the "conventional calculus" which frames teacher learning in professional development in terms of its classroom outcomes (Freeman, 2023). The premise of this calculus is that to be 'effective', teacher education input leads to improvements in teachers' classroom teaching which, in turn, are documentable in the learning their students do. The thinking of the calculus explains 'effectiveness' in terms of the alignment of these domains: of teacher education practices, classroom teaching, and students' experiences and learning (see, for example, Guskey, 2002 for a classic discussion of the alignment in the calculus). The explanation rests on the rock of causality, that teacher education can cause changes in classroom teaching which in turn can cause changes in student learning.

The reasoning is not necessarily wrong. My point is simply that it sets up a certain logic which can go unquestioned. As an assumption, causality supports researched explanations for why some teacher education designs and practices 'work' better than others (see, for example, Darling-Hammond et al., 2017 or Kennedy, 2019). An alternative to this chain of causal reasoning might be, for instance, that as they participate in a teacher education offering (maybe a preservice course or an inservice workshop), these teachers are making sense of what is happening in part by imagining how the experiences might relate to what they may do in the future. That future can be proximate, as it is for teachers learning in professional development events, or it can be more remote in time and place, as it is for preservice teachers as they sit in a lecture hall imagining their first years in the classroom. In this way of thinking about teacher learning, the participants are imagining what might happen as conditioned by how they see their immediate or longer term future classrooms. The reasoning of the conventional calculus walls in explanations of causality, while this 'imagined conditional' walls in explanations of future agency, as voiced by a participant's

comment at the end of an in-service workshop, 'Well, that was interesting but I can't see it working in my class.'

The contrast between the conventional calculus, anchored in ideas of causality, and the imagined conditional, based on ideas of teacher agency, highlights how different premises may explain how teachers learn. The two premises—of causality and agency—are metaphorical stones of our thinking. From them we build the walls of research and of program design. A teacher preparation program premised on causality for example might observe the classroom teaching following a teacher education event to see if and how the calculus has played out (e.g. Garrett et al. 2019). Did the participants use what they had learned? A program premised on agency, on the other hand, might ask participants to reflect on what they could seeing themselves doing following the professional development, in essence projecting the imagined conditional of their teaching beyond the event (e.g. Farrell, 2024).

Explanatory premises like causality and agency guide what we do in researching and designing teacher education, but I would actually put the argument more strongly. Explanatory premises like these define what we do and how we do it. Inasmuch as these choices are often assumed-- that language learning can be organized around proficiency, for example-- they usually function *de facto*, working implicitly in our thinking. They become the metaphorical stones that make up the walls in our thinking. These walls will always be part of what we do. We can't get away from this process of walling in and walling out; it is how we map the world. We can step back occasionally to reexamine the landscape however, which is my second point. Like Frost's poet, I'd say we need to walk our walls periodically:

> I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
> And on a day we meet to walk the line
> And set the wall between us once again.

Because we work with the tautology of language, the SLTE community is uniquely positioned to do such stepping back, to bring potentially a different view to researching more generally. Any form of teacher education works within the dichotomy of content and pedagogy, so math teachers need to know the mathematics content as well as how to teach it. The same goes for history or biology teachers: They need to know their content area and they need to know ways of teaching that content. Ideas like pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986) and knowledge-for-teaching (Ball et al., 2008) don't alter this dynamic; they simply refine the relationship between pedagogy and content by locating it within what the teacher does.

When language is both content and means, it challenges the dichotomy. Take the pedagogical approach known as 'content and language integrated learning' or CLIL for example. As the name suggests, the premise is that the content defines the language to be taught and that students can learn a new language through the content. This premise makes sense, at least until you consider communicative language teaching (CLT) and other methods which make language itself the content. From a CLIL point of view, the content in CLT is manufactured. It is language about fictitious characters living in fictitious worlds, spending time with imaginary families, eating in restaurants, taking trips, and so on.[1] That language must then be taught by means of the language of classroom methodology — 'practicing the dialogue', 'doing role plays', 'talking about your experience at the beach', and so on. The assumptions that language can be both content and method that are enacted in communicative language teaching undergird how language teachers are prepared. New teachers are taught, in their methods courses and teaching practice assignments, how to convert language into content so that they can teach it. CLIL is one way; CLT is another. These are two examples of many that enact the foundational assumption in second language teaching and teacher education which distinguishes between what is taught as content and how it is taught through pedagogy.

Walking the Walls of our Thinking

At its core then, SLTE centers language as a pedagogical tautology: It is what is being taught along with how it is being taught (and potentially learned). This tautology is central to researching SLTE. Thinking about, and unpacking it, can push the community to examine more closely what it is walling in and walling out. These walls come from our experience. For instance, we may have grown up in a social world in which the two categories of gender were understood to be defined by sex. But that world changes. We can come to recognize gender as a social distinction while sex is a physiological one; which means, among other things, that the personal pronouns you use can be seen as a deliberate decision rather than something that is predetermined. Once again, language goes to the heart of it. Language is what we say about the world as we see it.

In her book, *Counting: How We Use Numbers to Decide What Matters*, political scientist Deborah Stone makes a basic point about how numbers work as an explanatory resource. Stone points out that when we count, we are always counting something.

[1] The grammar-translation method is arguably the most faithful version CLIL teaching when the content is language itself insofar as the content-- language as grammar-- is defined as disciplinary knowledge which is taught through metalanguage. In grammar-translation classrooms, the language of instruction is commonly, the language of the community, underscoring this point. This seems ironic given how out of style grammar-translation teaching has become in spite of it so being widespread.

She writes, "Numbers spring from leaps of imagination, from seeing likenesses between things that aren't exactly the same." She gives an example: "To count how many people are unemployed, you've first got to decide what unemployment means. You've got to find the hidden likeness between a worker who was displaced by his inability to compete with a robot and one who was displaced by her inability to find childcare." (2020, pp. xiv-xi). These leaps of imagination are based in our experiences of the world, experiences that we frame through the language we use. Stone offers the example of how quantifying by counting can (re)frame this changing world in the research questions it asks, "How do we measure democracies to know how democratic they are...? How do we measure pain so doctors can help us cope with it? How do we measure students' knowledge and teachers' teaching abilities to find out how the two are connected?" She concludes, "There is no way to take biases out of these questions because they aren't objects independent of us and our beliefs. They are ideas and interpretations of our experience." (p. xiv) We know that language, to use Stone's words, is not 'an object independent of us and our beliefs'. Because researching SLTE centers language, it is positioned—perhaps even uniquely-- to move beyond the premised walls of our thinking by questioning some of the stones that build those walls.

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