# The language teacher as go-between

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In a world of increased multilingualism and multiculturalism, foreign language teachers seem to be challenged to be less authoritative transmitters of linguistic or pragmatic knowledge, than mediators between various identities, discourses and worldviews. This article attempts to define the challenges and the paradoxes in language teacher education, suggests a way of conceptualizing such an education in the multilingual/multicultural environments we live in today, and examines on a concrete example how a view of the language teacher as a go-between can lead to a more democratically oriented foreign language education.

## Introduction

In the United States as elsewhere, language teachers are called upon to reconsider what they are in the business of doing, but their business is fraught with paradoxes. The geopolitical tensions make it more imperative than ever that people learn each others' languages at the same time as the spread of English as an international language is making all other languages seemingly superfluous. The very notions of "native speaker" and of "national standard languages" are being put into question by the research community at a time when nationalism seems to be again on the rise. In a world of increased multilingualism and multiculturalism, foreign language teachers seem to be challenged to be less authoritative transmitters of linguistic or pragmatic knowledge, than mediators between various identities, discourses and worldviews. As Hans Lauge Hansen writes, foreign language teaching in an era of globalization (i.e., global market and global terrorism) presents a two-fold challenge.

> On the one hand it will be necessary to make our present professional skills visible and relevant. It is no longer enough to teach language and literature to the students; it will be our responsibility to explain why foreign language acquisition is important, and how the study of literary and cultural

issues is a part of an intercultural *Bildung* process of the individual students. On the other hand, the foreign language studies must reflect on the relation of language, culture, identity, history and the self knowledge and imaginary world as represented in art and literature (Hansen 2004, p. 115).

Between the development of *communicative competence* based on common pragmatic tasks in a global context of economic cooperation, and the development of *intercultural competence* based on an understanding of local cultural and historical differences (see debate between Edmondson & House 1999, 2000 and Hu 1999, 2000), language study is in search of a political cause that the organizers of this conference have called "democracy". For the first time, a field that didn't use to think of itself at the vanguard of political engagement is thrust into the limelight: in Europe, it is called upon to forge a multilingual Europe; in the U.S. it is enjoined to serve the needs of economic competitiveness and national security.

In this article, I want to define the challenges and the paradoxes in language teacher education, suggest a way of conceptualizing such an education in the multilingual/multicultural environments we live in today, and examine on a concrete example how a view of the language teacher as a go-between can lead to a more democratically oriented foreign language education.

## The challenges

Several trends are visible in language teacher education these days. They are directed toward more reflexivity, and a greater awareness of the relation of language, identity, desire, and transnational mobility.

In a recent article in the *TESOL Quarterly*, Donald Freeman and Karen Johnson (1998) call for more reflective practice and awareness of the social, cultural, political import of language education. They propose shifting the focus away from a major concern with received content knowledge (i.e., grammar and vocabulary), and the received knowledge of second language acquisition research, towards a concern with teaching itself, as an educational and institutional endeavor, in particular the social context of schools and schooling, and the socially negotiated, constructivist processes of the pedagogical activity. They end their article with a plea for more social, cultural, and institutional awareness on the part of language teachers:

> We believe that teachers must understand their own beliefs and knowledge about learning and teaching and be thoroughly aware of the certain im-

> pact of such knowledge and beliefs on their classrooms and the language learners in them. We believe that teachers must be fully aware of and develop a questioning stance toward the *complex social, cultural, and institutional structures* that pervade the professional landscapes where they work ... This drive to understand oneself and the impact of one's work on others lies at the core of the activity of teaching; it is the wellspring of *reflective practice, classroom inquiry, and ongoing professional development* (Freeman & Johnson 1998, p. 412, my emphases).

In industrialized societies with a substantial number of immigrants, there is a call for greater awareness of the convergence between the goals of foreign language education for autochthones, second language education to recent immigrants, and heritage language education for children of immigrants seeking to reconnect with their ancestors' language. In his book *Language, Education and Ideology* (2002), Timothy Reagan points to the American paradox: on the one hand, the system encourages children to abandon their mother tongues in favor of English, and on the other, it encourages native speakers of English to learn other languages. He adds that language classrooms provide the ideal space for cultural, political, and ideological issues of language, power and identity to be discussed and addressed. He emphasizes the need to include such discussions in the language classroom based on the myths and ideologies that characterize the status quo.

> Students need to understand the ways in which language is used to convey and protect social status, as well as how it can be used to oppress and denigrate both individuals and groups. The foreign language classroom can either reinforce negative language attitudes and prejudices or be used to empower students to better understand the social roles of language in society (Reagan 2002, p. 153).

In the case of English, many educators are concerned about the potentially alienating effect of being taught to speak and write a foreign language as desirable but as controversial as English. They focus on issues of identity and desire and call for a pedagogy of engagement. Awad Ibrahim, studying African immigrants learning English in Canada, writes: " we as teachers must, first, identify the different sites in which our students invest their identities and desires and, second, develop materials that engage our students' raced, classed, gendered, sexualized, and abled identities" (1999, p. 366). In Australia, Alastair Pennycook proposes a "pedagogy of engagement" which is "more than arranging the chairs in a circle and discussing social issues" (1999, p. 338). Rather than simply

including multicultural topics (such as food, customs, religions, etc.) to broaden the representation of people from different backgrounds in the curriculum, or promoting rational discussion and debate of social issues on a general level, a pedagogy of engagement focuses on how students are invested in particular discourses and how these discourses structure their identities and pathways in life. It links teaching with the lives and concerns of students, and requires any educator of second language learners to consider the question; "What identities or subject positions do we make available in our classes? And how might we both create more possibilities and find ways of working with students' identity formation?" (Pennycook 2001, p. 157).

In Singapore, Allan Luke feels that language education (and English language education in particular) has become a huge market commodity, together with objective product testing and market research; textbook production has become a multibillion dollar industry; educational policy has become a commodity testing, purchase and endorsement, and educational research has slowly been co-opted by a technocratic/industrial model of education that deskills and deprofessionalizes teachers and makes them into "commodity fetishists" (Luke 2003). He makes an ardent plea to liberate language teachers from this fetishism and to enable them to be the full educators they deserve to be, namely cosmopolitan, trans-cultural go-betweens, who can better respond to the new economic and political conditions of a globalized economy.

> What is needed is nothing short of the reenvisioning of a transcultural and cosmopolitan teacher; a teacher with the capacity to 'shunt' between the local and global, to explicate and engage with the broad flows of knowledge and information, technologies and populations, artifacts and practices that characterize the present moment. What is needed is a new community of teachers that could and would work, communicate and exchange – physically and virtually – across national and regional boundaries (Luke in press, p. 14).

Here too, a call for a more aware generation of language teachers, but for an awareness that reaches the global level of geopolitics and the consequences of our teaching on a world policy scale.

In sum: In all these cases, there is a push for giving language teachers a more critical, socially, culturally and politically aware knowledge-base than just content knowledge (grammar/vocabulary or facts about SLA). Language educators seem to sense a need for language teachers to become attuned both to the local needs of the students and the global demands that will be placed on these students once they leave the school; a need

for schools to respond not only to the domestic demands for greater equity of access and economic opportunity but to the much more multifarious international demand for translators, go-betweens, mediators, peace-makers, cross-linguistic and cross-cultural catalysts.

# The paradoxes

These voices from the domestic and the international scene are not endorsed by everybody, however. There are some counter-forces at work. In the United States the State Department and the Department of Defense, and to some extent, the Department of Education, do not see foreign languages as a question of education, but of national security. The motto is: "Uncle Sam wants you to learn a foreign language. To learn more, visit: www.learnlanguage.org" (Feal 2004). Governmental agencies are mainly interested in the teaching and learning of advanced language skills in those languages that are critical to U.S. homeland security and they are heavily funding efforts in that area. We should therefore put our resources, they say, not in teaching native speakers of English beginning French, Spanish or Russian, but in teaching immigrant heritage speakers of Arabic, Farsi, Spanish or Korean advanced literacy skills in those strategically critical languages. Note that advanced language skills, according to many second language acquisition experts, are conceived as special purpose skills, e.g., the language skills needed by surgeons, lawyers, and engineers to do their jobs in foreign countries, not as general education capacities and a sophisticated understanding of foreign societies and cultures. The professionalism they have in mind for the foreign language teacher is, to use Gerard Hanlon's distinction, not the service professionalism that the teaching profession has traditionally identified with, namely, that of civil servants serving the educational needs of young citizens of a nation-state. Instead the professionalism that is being promoted by corporations and governments alike is a commercial professionalism that is oriented toward institutional and national profitability, efficiency and competitiveness (Hanlon 1998).

On American campuses, foreign language students seem to be split on the value of social and cultural awareness raising in foreign language classes. Two recent articles document the sobering facts. In a recent article in *Die Unterrichtspraxis*, the professional journal for the teaching of German in the U.S., Monika Chavez (2002) reports on a survey she did of some 200 first, second and third year students of German at the University of Wisconsin on how they defined culture at large, and more specifically, the notion of culture in the context of learning a foreign language. Although

there were differences according to proficiency level, there was an astonishingly ever-present definition of culture as food, dress, and customs. Beside food and dress, students definitely preferred to see culture as what the *National Standards* calls 'practices' (patterns of social interaction) and 'perspectives' (attitudes, values, ideas, social and political issues), rather than as the 'products' that German teachers have traditionally considered to form the core of German culture, such as science, music, literature, arts, and economics. 50% of the students resented learning about culture in language classes altogether and resented even more being tested on cultural knowledge. "This is a course on language not culture". "I believe culture is not suited for a foreign language class. It should be a separate class". In fact many not only put in doubt the significance of cultural knowledge to foreign language learning, but indeed the very existence of a national culture. Chavez sums up students' concerns as follows:

> [This survey] articulates three concerns of language students: (1)Teaching culture takes away time from the real object of language instruction, i.e., grammar; (2) teaching culture in a foreign language class devolves into dilettantism, either because of time constraints or because teachers lack expertise; (3) teaching culture is a political issue, guided by politically correct, ivory-tower views and autocratically imposed on classroom teachers and students (2002, p. 135).

However, heritage language educators have argued that paying closer attention to the sociopolitical and ideological nature of language and culture creates greater equality among language learners (Valdes 1997). Thus, in an article titled "Diversity and inclusion of sociopolitical issues in FL classrooms" (2003), Ryuko Kubota and her colleagues report on a survey they conducted at the University of North Carolina among 244 beginning learners of Japanese, Spanish and Swahili, as well as advanced learners of Spanish on the following question: "Does FL learning invite you to reflect on issues of race, gender, class, and social justice? Why or why not?" While advanced students definitely made the link more readily than beginning students, the results showed that some, particularly male students in beginning-level classes, resist engaging in sociopolitical issues. Kubota et al. write:

> Further research is needed to find out if the resistance is related to resentment toward multiculturalism in general or a desire for detachment from one's own marginalized racial/ethnic background. This desire for detachment suggests the need for further investigation into culturally responsive

> pedagogy … [In particular], some minority students in this study did not think that foreign language learning should be made relevant to their ethnic background … Incorporating a sociopolitical aspect of culture is often challenging, as expressed by Tedick and Walker 1994: "It is easier to deal with Oktoberfest in the German classroom than to explore the emergence of xenophobia among youth in Germany and to contrast and compare their emergence to parallel patterns in the United States (p. 308)" (2003, pp. 21–22).

Nevertheless, Kubota et al conclude their article with a plea that echoes that of their English teaching colleagues mentioned earlier:

> Foreign language education will continue to be viewed as a major educational agenda in the age of globalization. At the same time, it inevitably will be situated in an increasingly more diverse society. Researchers and practitioners must shift their attention beyond apolitical appreciation and celebration of foreign culture, to critically explore issues of diversity and sociopolitical aspects of human communication, and to make foreign language education instrumental in creating greater equality (22).

In sum: We find foreign language education at the intersection of the major political issues of our times. The demands for greater critical awareness of the international and global dimensions of language teaching intersect in interesting and often conflictual ways with the local dimensions of language teaching to serve the needs of either homeland security or greater social justice at home. Meanwhile, many students just want to play it safe, pass the test and maintain their grade point average. So how should we prepare teachers to face these challenges and paradoxes?

# Preparing teachers for multilingual/multicultural environments

Gone are the days where teachers could hide behind rules of grammar and the discipline of dictations to get students to learn the language. Gone are also the days when they could rely on the tacit, communicative knowledge that the native speaker has of his/her (standard national) language and (standard national) culture. This is no longer true neither of the native speakers teaching their own native language in their country or abroad, nor of the native speakers teaching a foreign language and culture in their country to other native speakers. This does not mean they can no longer teach the standard national language and national traditions, only

that these symbols of national identity have become multiple, hybrid, changing, and often conflictual. The gap is growing between young and old, the educated and the less educated, between professionals and non-professionals, shareholders and wage earners, the cosmopolitan jetsetter and the sedentary citizen: they speak different languages and understand the world differently, even if they use the same linguistic code.

If we define the language teacher as the quintessential go-between among people with various languages, and of different cultures, generations, and genders, then it might be appropriate to think of the language teacher as a cross-cultural mediator, someone who has acquired the ability to interact with 'others', be they native or non-native speakers, present or past writers; someone who has learned to accept other perspectives and perceptions of the world, to mediate between different perspectives, and to be conscious of their evaluations of difference (Kramsch 1998, Byram & Zarate 1994, Byram 1997).

We can look at language teachers from two different perspectives, that of the expertise they have to display and that of the knowledge they have to possess. Language teachers' expertise extends to three areas:

1) they are expert speakers and writers of the culture they teach. Even if they are not native speakers, a communicative approach to language teaching requires them not only to transmit linguistic facts, but to model native speaker language use, for example by making the L2 both an object of instruction, and the medium of instruction, and by putting the students in communicative situations that are as authentic as possible. Unlike their colleagues in other fields, language teachers must not only *know about* the language, but must be *able to use* the language appropriately, i.e., to display a discourse, pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence adapted to a given social context.

2) they are expert methodologists of the instruction they deliver. It has long been recognized that native speakers are not necessarily good teachers of their own language without special methodological training. Part of the subject matter in which language teachers are experts is their familiarity with second language acquisition/applied linguistic research, and their mastery of the most effective pedagogic methods for developing learners' communicative competence.

3) they are expert professionals of the institutions they serve. These institutions include their school or their university but also the professional organizations, journals, collegial networks, as well as the national and international communities they belong to.

The knowledge that language teachers are expected to display is an app-lied knowledge. In their three domains of expertise, teachers are called upon to apply their theoretical knowledge to mediate between langua-ges, and between learners and institutions. As experts, they are to be linguistic/cultural mediators, methodological mediators and professional mediators. Combining domains of expertise and mediation demands, we might then conceive of what-a-language-teacher-needs-to-know not so much in terms of one *knowledge-base*, but, rather, as six different know-ledges or *savoirs,* a term used by Michael Byram and Geneviève Zarate (1994) to characterize the intercultural learner, but that I apply here to the intercultural teacher. These six savoirs would be:

- a body of theoretical knowledge or *savoir,*
- a linguistic, interactional competence or *savoir dire/faire,*
- an interpretive and relational competence or *savoir comprendre*,
- a methodological competence or *savoir enseigner*,
- intercultural attitudes and beliefs or *savoir être,*
- a critical cultural stance or *savoir s'engager*.

The French phrase *savoir+* infinitive has the advantage of allowing for variations on the notion of knowledge-base. These six *savoirs* would ideally get declined across the three roles that teachers play as expert speakers, expert methodologists, and expert professionals. The list below represents a synthesis of what could constitute a critical foreign language awareness program for language teachers. It is not meant as a curricular blueprint nor as a laundry list to be checked off in teacher development programs. Rather, it attempts to delineate the horizon of what language teachers might hope to understand about themselves and their lifelong teaching goals within multicultural societies and a multilingual global world.

For the language teacher as an expert 'speaker of culture' (Ochs 2002), or cultural go-between, *savoir* means:

- Understanding language and culture, not as static information but as discourse, as social semiotic.
- Being able to use the language both like a native and like a non-native speaker, as both insider and outsider.
- Being able to distinguish the ideational, interpersonal and textual meaning of texts and conversations.
- Being able to see oneself in one's historic contingency, as one among many.

- Being prepared to ask big questions and to appreciate the political dimensions of language teaching.

For the teacher as educator and methodological go-between, *savoir* means:

- Remaining flexible with regard to methodology, and being aware that there is no right and wrong, only appropriate, methodologies.
- Involving students in the choice of teaching and testing methods.
- Mediating between students' paradoxical need to identify with the foreign Other and to escape its linguistic and cultural norms.
- Mediating between what can be taught and tested, and what must be taught but cannot be tested.
- Keeping a log for self-reflexion.
- Understanding why one has become a teacher of this particular language rather than another.

For the teacher as professional go-between, as mediator between the educational institution and the world of peers, parents and employers, *savoir* means:

- Knowing one's room for intellectual and political maneuver,
- Mediating between institutional constraint and educational value; between disciplines,
- Mediating between commercial interests of textbook publishers and students' needs,
- Seeking opportunities for professional development and life-long learning.

The *savoirs* charted above have fluid boundaries, and language teachers are constantly drawing on their competencies in each of the areas. This movement between and across areas of expertise helps to capture the complexities of language teaching. For example, knowledge of the subject matter (*savoir*) includes, for language teachers, not only a theoretical knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, but also the knowledge that their work as professionals takes place within particular institutions of learning that can both constrain and enhance the choices available for professional and intellectual maneuver.

Linguistic and interactional competence *(savoir dire/faire)* entails for language teachers not only the ability to act and interact like native or near-native speakers. As members of different cultural groupings, teachers

must make their own sociolinguistic and pragmatic choices of interaction and interpretation available to their students, thereby providing models of the multilingual speaker.

Interpretive and relational competence (*savoir comprendre*) means for a language teacher not only the ability to understand what is said or written, but the ability to put what is said in relation to the unsaid or unsayable, to interpret what is meant by what was said. But beyond that, teachers, as members of an institution, must not only understand the rules and values of their institution but facilitate institutional change as they engage with new disciplinary ideas and learn from the expertise of others at home and abroad. In their professional capacity as go-betweens, they must keep constant watch on how concepts are interpreted through their own culturally situated discourses while keeping a critical eye on how particular ideological positions are developed through language.

Methodological competence (*savoir enseigner*) within a mediational pedagogy is not merely the ability to design effective exercises for Monday morning. It entails maintaining a principled vigilance and de-centeredness from which teachers can teach their students how to view themselves as the "other". It can serve as a pedagogic principle for teaching students how to recognize conventional views and to take more critical stances vis-à-vis those views.

The endeavor to become a professional mediator involves a lifelong commitment to seek out opportunities for professional, intellectual, and pedagogic development and for engaging in ethnographic research on one's own classroom (*savoir etre)*. Finally, refracted through all these competencies, is the life-long endeavor to explore one's own identity as a language teacher, one's relationship to the language and its speakers, and what one hopes to achieve by teaching it (*savoir s'engager*).

## A concrete exercise in democratic education

The need for a new kind of language teacher is nowhere more urgent than in the increasing use of computer technology to foster communication across cultures (e.g., Belz 2002, 2003, Belz & Muller-Hartmann 2003). Paige Ware explored the technological and the discursive parameters of cross-cultural telecollaboration between American students of German at a U.S. American university and German students of English at an university in the Eastern part of Germany, in an effort to document the development of these students' "intercultural competence" (Ware 2003, Ware & Kramsch in press). In one typical exchange, where the students

have been given the choice to write in their native or in the foreign language, Robert (American) and Marie (German) enter into conversation about the assignment in the (invisible) presence of their other, on-line, classmates.

For the duration of the telecollaborative project from which the following excerpt is taken, students in the German and American classrooms were asked to write to one another in discussion groups a total of twelve times during the semester. Their writing was organized around classroom assignments, to which they responded alternately in German and in English in an asynchronous format, or delayed time forum. They wrote in response to teacher-directed assignments and to one another's open-ended initiations of topics of personal interest. A typical exchange would start, for example, with a student in Germany posting a message in English to the small-group bulletin board on one day, and her American partner responding in German the following day. This asynchronous format for discussion, while not as spontaneous and immediate as real-time (synchronous) interactions, alleviated logistical problems in scheduling incurred by the time difference between the two countries. Students were held accountable, however, for posting their messages by prescribed deadlines so that classroom instruction could utilize transcripts of the student writing for in-class discussions.

Students were asked to initiate their on-line contact during the first week of the exchange by commenting on the results of a language and culture survey they had filled out before the onset of the telecollaborative project. This first assignment asked the students to compare their responses to culturally significant words such as 'democracy' and 'freedom', e.g., "in a democracy, one may …", "freedom is …" (cf. Furstenberg et al, 2001). In the group from which the episode is taken, the initial part of the exchange for this group of five students is not as fruitful as they had hoped and ends rather quickly in frustration and disengagement on the part of one of the students. The exchange was actually so memorable for the other classmates on line that they often referred to it later in the semester, but did not understand what had caused the misunderstandings.

In the first turn of this episode between Rob and Marie, Rob enters his first posting to the group, comprised of five students: two Americans and three Germans. All members of the group have previously posted their first assignment, and they are waiting for Rob's contribution. Rob's posting deviates slightly from the task, as he neither addresses the survey nor his classmates' responses to the survey and he chooses to write in English instead of German. However, in his message he does provide the other students in his group with some personal context:

> Current Forum: Group 3
> Date: Tue Mar 5 2002 4:37 pm
> Author: Rob>
> Subject: Tuesday, March 5
>
> Well, I guess it is already Wednesday the 6th for you guys. I am not sure to which one of you I am supposed to be writing to, but I guess that will clear itself up in time. I am not sure I will be able to hold an interesting discussion today because I have had a very bad and long day and have a lot of work to do. Are you guys excited about doing the email exchange thing? Do you have much contact with Americans? There was an American army base in the town I was in (in former West Germany) and so many people there thought that all Americans were so loud and obnoxious. I soon learned that there were many American bases throughout Germany and unfortunately many similar Americans. I learned German fast and with a good accent just so I would not be related to them. But I am not sure how all that is in der ehemaligen DDR, I mean, with the American bases. Do you dislike being called that? If so, what do you prefer, if anything? Many people in the US are proud to be from certain states (like ours) or even from the North or the South. We are such a big country that we need to divide ourselves up in order to define ourselves and relate to others. I remember, before I left Germany last summer there was this horrible song on the radio about how everything in Osten was better than everything in Westen. Do you recognize this song? There was also something about how those in Osten could kiss better than those in Westen ... I thought it was a terrible song.

Within a traditional pedagogy, the first reaction of a language teacher might be to deplore the fact that Rob does not address the assignment and that his tone is inappropriately informal, casual, indeed almost flippant. The teacher might feel that Rob's message lacks seriousness about the exchange, as he switches topics four times in seventeen sentences, indulges in non-sequiturs, and ends abruptly with a negative evaluation of a former East German song that risks offending his unknown German partners.

Along the dimensions of *savoirs*, the language teacher would need to draw upon her linguistic and interactional competence to understand the ambiguity in Rob's message. Remembering that Rob is an American undergraduate, whose parents are paying to get him a good education so that he can land a good job later on, the teacher might realize that for Rob an e-mail chat might seem like a distraction from his main goal which is to do well on a test and get a good grade in the course. Getting to know native speakers might not be his top priority or interest. Moreover, living in central Pennsylvania, Rob might not be used to talking to foreigners. This might explain his awkwardness in trying to find common conversa-

tional ground. As Erving Goffman would say (1981), Rob has problems with footing and authorial voice. He makes an effort to align himself with his unknown interlocutors as a fellow peer ("you guys") and tries to mitigate his awkwardness by emphasizing how busy he is and by apologizing in advance for what may come across as an incoherent message ("I am not sure I will be able to hold an interesting discussion today because I have had a very bad and long day and have a lot of work to do."). This self-deprecation would work in his favor with American peers, but will this work with German interlocutors? Part of his placating strategy is to present himself as an atypical American, someone who has learned German "fast and with a good accent", in order to establish credibility with other Germans. But how credible is he really, considering the aura that surrounds his persona as an American, whether he wants it or not? His attempts to relate to his interlocutors personally are undermined by the very language he uses (English rather than German) and his apparent disregard of their previously posted messages. He asks if they are excited at the "exchange thing", even though Marie and her peers had previously written that they were looking forward to it.

The language teacher can find the same ambiguity in Rob's attempts to demonstrate his knowledge about Germany. On the one hand he gives all indication that he is not an 'ugly American' and that he knows the official way of referring to the former GDR, but on the other hand his incongruous juxtaposition of the GDR and American military bases casts doubt about his real understanding of German history. His direct and relentlessly inquisitive style suggests that he is interested in his German partners' views, yet his inconsequential chatter ("Do you dislike being called that? If so, what do you prefer, if anything?") shows that he might be more interested in filling the screen with words and getting rid of an unwelcome assignment than in finding out who his partners really are.

Marie's response shows how difficult it is for members of a different discourse community to grasp an interlocutor's intentions beyond the words uttered, especially in a medium that for Eastern Germans is still new and exotic and that is used as would be pen and paper in a pen pal exchange. Marie dutifully addresses each of Rob's five questions and elaborates on them in full detail. In turn, she asks several "big" questions of her own:

    Current Forum: Group 3
    Date: Wed Mar 6 2002 12:55 pm
    Author: GERMAN, LERNERIN D <None>
    Subject: East - West - conflict

Hi Rob,

this is Marie. I read you letter today and I have been a little surprised. You have made the experience, that the Germans think or thought the Americans are abnoxious? Why that? Because of the role they played after 2nd worldwar? Actually the US was an occupation power after the 2nd worldwar. Do you experienced any anger or something like that?

Now a little history lesson: After 2nd worldwar the former 3rd empire was splitted up by the Allies into two parts. Western Germany was controlled by the US, France and England. The Eastern was controlled by Russia. The ideas of order weren't not the same in each part of Germany. So they argued with each other, then came the wall and the cold war (is this the right word?) So there can't be any army-base in the eastern part of Germany. Nowerdays there are also no army-bases in the East.

Now about your question, if we are interested in having an one to one email? I thought our group is the kind: small group discussion. Or didn't I understand you? Do you like to write email to private email account?

I have no contact to Americans. In former times I had a pencilfriend in America. Her name was Jamie but I think we don't fit together. She had some strange ideas about the world I couldn't handle with.

Well, I was born in the former GDR. Now I'm just a German girl. We have also federal states like you in the US. I live in the new federal state of Mecklenburg/Vorpommern. It was created after the reunification. It is situated in the northeast you might know.

Nowerdays there even several conflicts between East and West. The younger generation is more progressiv than the older people in Germany. Many of the old eastern and western people couldn't handle with the new situation. After the wall broke down many of eastern Germans lost their jobs. Today we have the highest number of unemployed people. We never knew that in our former state. The social system in the GDR was bad but there weren't unemployed people. That's just one reason for bitterness here.

To my point of view the reunification was just fine. Now there are so many abilities for me. I'm really happy and glad. Everything in the GDR was strictly organized. You have to do this, you are going to work there, you won't have the chance to do the A-level. Today it is possible to do what you want. Just having a little American dream. For instance: go on holiday maybe to the non-social-states. People from GDR were allways controlled by our secret service: STASI = Staatssicherheitsdienst. My boyfriend has relatives in the western part of Germany. When his aunt send a package to his family in former times those packeges were allways opened by others first. To see if there is anything hostile in it. He also told me when he was about the age of 10, 4 years before the wall came down, the principal took his pullover away.

On the pullover was an eagle, some football players and the US flag. He had to go to the principal and to explain who gave him the pullover. There are so many things like that.

Today it is like in America maybe. We are allowed to do what we want, to go where we want and to say what we think. We are just glad. There are allways good and bad things.

To my mind it was the best that could happen to us.

The song of Mr. Niemann is just a reaction to the snippy western people. Some of them think they are better than the eastern ones. It's a little revenge. He said in an interview, that he couldn't believe it, that 10 years after reunification so many prejudices are still existing. I think he is right. Both sides of Germany (it is stupid to think in sides) had pros and cons.

What do you think is Bush a warhawk. We had a little discussion in class about. Write me your opinion.

Greetings Marie

Marie's message shows that she has taken Rob's message not as placating chitchat, nor as the awkward attempts by an American male teenager to make contact with German male and female partners, but at face value. By choosing to write in Rob's language, English, but by questioning his statements, she both aligns herself with him and puts him back in his place. Her 'little history lesson' can sound either like a friendly rebuke with a slightly motherly undertone especially from a female student, or like a didactic, face-saving kind of foreigner talk. What in German might sound like a matter-of-fact remark risks sounding offensive in English. This ambiguity characterizes the rest of Marie's message precisely because it is written in English – a language of which they both share the code but not the discourse.

Marie presents herself as a (newborn) Westerner, suggesting that she aligns herself with Americans, as free to voice her opinions and to ask others about their opinions as she imagines Americans to be, and as free to criticize or at least to express the criticisms of others. After all, Bob seemed to be open to direct talk, as evidenced by his first message. From the sheer length of her message, we can see that she enjoys writing in English – the sexy language of power and technology. Mary must know that her version of history is not the same as Rob's, especially if she once had a pen pal in America "who had some strange ideas about the world". Her coyness and subsequent chattiness can be seen, like Rob's, as serving to conceal her deeper ambivalence vis-à-vis the two different histories and worldviews they each represent.

In the rest of her message, Marie tries to give Rob a sense of what it means to be an Eastern German young adult in a unified Germany. Her depiction portrays the ambivalence between the democratic freedoms and the economic miseries of capitalistic Germany. Her discourse sounds like a parody of an ESL textbook. Marie seems to enjoy using idiomatic

phrases like "There are always good and bad things", "it was the best that could happen to us", "both sides . . . had pros and cons" that both illustrate the correct use of English grammar and intone a certain laissez-faire political worldview that she associates with America. She underestimates, of course, to what extent communism has been so demonized in the American public imagination that there can be, in Rob's understanding, no 'pro and con' regarding the former German Democratic Republic.

In Rob's conservative worldview, communism was bad and that's the end of that.

Marie's message is not only ambivalent, but has to be understood as a reenactment of what she titled in her subject heading "East-West conflict". In direct response to Rob's naïve, but not so innocent, question regarding the Eastern German song, Marie politicizes the issue. Rob might have intended to be flirtatious by evoking the kissing practices of Eastern and Western Germans, but Marie responds with politics. That song, she writes, is a "little revenge" against Westerners – thus echoing her own use of the "little history lesson" she administered Rob earlier. When she then turns abruptly and openly to American politics, and asks whether "Bush is a warhawk", Rob should not be surprised. Her direct question: "What do you think is Bush a warhawk" reflects both her pleasure at using the new idiomatic phrase she recently learned in her English class and her aggressive stance vis-à-vis the current American administration. The direct request "Write me your opinion", without any of the usual softeners "I wonder what you think of…" or "I would value your opinion", comes across less as a friendly inquiry than as a summons.

Current Forum: Group 3
Date: Wed Mar 6 2002 4:59 pm
Author: Rob
Subject: Re: East - West - conflict

Dear Marie,
Thank you very much for the little history lesson, but unfortunately I was already aware of that. My only question was whether the American army bases had moved into the old eastern part of Germany since die Wende. Maybe because you did not grow up around any of these bases, you do not have the same experiences as the people in West Germany do with the soldiers. And yes, I met many people that did not like Americans at all ... As I said, I learned to speak German very fast and with a good accent, so that later I was able to avoid these problems. As far as Bush is concerned, I would apologize for his being elected as our president, but, as I was in Germany at the time of his election, I was not able to vote and therefor am

not guilty of his being elected. Now that he is president, all I can do is
hope that he does what is right instead of criticizing him.

From Rob's recasting of Marie's phrase "little history lesson", it is clear
that he has been offended. He does not rename the subject matter, however,
and pursues a line of defense that can be read as a continuation of the cold
war going on between them. He has not detected the caustic irony in Marie's
first paragraph ("You have made the experience, that the Germans think
or thought the Americans are abnoxious? Why that?") and still doesn't
seem to realize that for many Eastern Germans the American army was as
much an army of occupation as the Soviet army was. Marie might write
excellent English and claim to be now a Western kind of German, but her
discourse is clearly that of an Eastern German. Rob, by contrast, claims to
know German well and to be a different kind of American, but, by invo-
king personal experience rather than political opinions ("*you* do not have
the same experiences …"; "*I* was not able to vote …"; "all *I* can do is
hope …"), moral pragmatism rather than politically guided principles
("Now that he is president, all I can do is hope that he does what is right
…"), he adopts the attitude of a typical American conservative.

   Marie recognizes Rob's offended tone, and attempts to mend fences
in her next message:

> Current Forum: Group 3
> Date: Thu Mar 7 2002 12:11 am
> Author: GERMAN, LERNERIN D <None>
> Subject: Re: East - West - conflict
>
> Good morning Rob,
> It's about 7 and it's my birthday.
> Probably my English knowledges are to blame for the misunderstanding,
> I'm sorry, I wouldn't teach you. Your answer in order to Bush sounds a
> little bit sulky. I don't want to attack you. Or was it just ironic?
>        My English seems to be that bad that I maybe can't hear those fine
> differences.
>
> Have a nice day
> Marie

Marie is struggling or presents herself as struggling with the truth value
she is expected to attribute to Rob's statement. Surely he must be "sulky,"
a word that she had looked up in the dictionary under "schmollend." She
makes an attempt to apologize for the misunderstanding by pointing to her
command of English as the source of the difficulty - a common strategy to

save face in cross-cultural encounters. In this way, the culprit of miscommunication is seen as language itself, not as an underlying individual difference in ideology or a cultural difference in the pragmatics of interacting. Indeed, the problem for Rob and Marie might be a question of "hearing those fine differences", but one has to wonder whether, behind their disclaimers and their desperate attempts to save face, each of the interlocutors heard those fine differences only all too well.

   In his final message of the week to Marie, Rob prefers to leave the question unresolved.

> Current Forum: Group 3
> Read 16 times
> Date: Thu Mar 7 2002 4:56 pm
> Author: Rob
> Subject: Re: East - West - conflict
>
>
> happy birthday, and no, your english is not bad at all.

Rob's one-liner acknowledges Marie's previous message but disengages from a pursuit of any of the conversation topics. The (unintended?) juxtaposition of the subject heading and of the reaffirmation that language was not the problem, suggests that a knowledge of each other's languages is not sufficient to dispel cold war attitudes and engage in real intercultural communication. From this message on, Rob participates very little in all subsequent weeks, and he distances himself interpersonally by using no more second person pronouns to address his on-line peers. Marie, however, continues to write more prolifically than any of her peers on either side of the exchange.

   After the on-line exchange ended, the researcher attempted to clarify what had happened by asking Rob and Marie how they viewed the event. Rob did not respond, Marie replied over e-mail with this explanation:

> ... I wanted to avoid misunderstandings. I felt like I had to explain everything, because I wanted him to understand what I was trying to explain. I had a long time to think about it and in the end I can't say what made him angry. I read the letter once, twice, again an again. I cannot say ... my big explanations maybe? My writing sounds very teachful, don't you think so? I wrote him so many things, he had already known, because he had spend time in Germany before ... Could this be the reason? Write me your opinion.

Clearly, the tension emerged not just through the turn-by-turn interaction, in which one could say that Rob and Marie 'misinterpreted' one

another's intentions or conducted their own cold war with words. In addition to their different historical and cultural subjectivities, the clash was brought about by their differing expectations of the exchange, their different levels of investment in learning and using the target language, and their prior experiences as language learners. But most of all it came from the irruption of history into Rob and Marie's most mundane email exchange. The realization that larger forces impinge on social actors' choice of words is accompanied by a certain degree of sadness at the inevitability of cross-cultural clashes such as this one. Indeed, small email exchanges can unconsciously replay larger historical conflicts that lie beyond any of the interlocutors' consciousness. Language teachers can play a role in bringing these conflicts into the open and analyzing how they get played out.

If we look back at our six *savoirs*, it is clear that the role of go-between is a more complex one for the language teacher than for the language learner as envisaged by Byram and Zarate (1994). In the example above, Rob's German teacher would have to know or know where to look up the historical facts of the two German states, know the connotations of the expressions "the former German Democratic Republic" or "East Germany", but she would also have to be able to interpret the meaning of the pattern of German conversational style and American teenager's e-mail style. Marie's English teacher would need to be sensitive to the differences in the way recent German history has been written in the U.S and in Germany, and how Rob and Marie have been socialized into seeing the world, what ideologies underlie each student's discourse, what facework strategies he and she are putting in place to defuse the situation. As cross-cultural methodologists, both teachers would need to know how to lead their students to discover these things for themselves and to discuss them within a larger social, historical and political context. Furthermore, given the polarity that this excerpt invariably creates whenever it is discussed with language teachers, teachers would need to be aware of where their sympathies lie and why, and to find ways to discuss 'big' questions of politics and ideology without excluding anyone. The current political situation in the United States and the attitude vis-à-vis the United States around the world make such a discussion a particularly difficult challenge, but one that language teachers cannot shy away from.

# Conclusion

Language educators have been advocating a more critically aware pedagogy of foreign languages and cultures. After the euphoria surrounding communicative and proficiency-oriented pedagogies, where the challenge was mostly mastery of the code and its appropriate use in circumscribed situations of everyday life, we now realize that cross-cultural understanding requires a basic willingness to question one's own and one's interlocutor's assumptions and beliefs, to interpret intentions, and to engage worldviews that are different from one's own. If the purpose for teaching foreign languages is to help students gain a better understanding of other ways of making meaning in the world, language teachers have to be prepared to go beyond linguistic form and to discuss meanings of all sorts: grammatical, semantic, social, cultural, political, ideological meanings, expressed in and through language as discourse.

The episode between Rob and Marie illustrates the challenges language teachers face in their roles as intercultural go-betweens, and as mediators for a democratic dialogue on language, identity and culture in the context of technology-mediated learning. With the rapid exchange of information and the ease of developing cross-cultural contact through the Internet, we can expect such conflictual encounters to become more frequent. The teacher's role is less to help students avoid misunderstandings, than to help them work through the misunderstandings in ways that become learnable moments.

From the facilitators, conversational partners, and moderators that they have often become in a communicatively oriented pedagogy, teachers are called upon to raise learners' awareness of the historicity and subjectivity of discourse and of the moral responsibility of the speaking subject. Teachers have a crucial role to play as practitioners between academic disciplines, as mediators between generations and social classes, as catalysts between conflicting worldviews, as navigators between the demands of the institution that pays them and the needs of the world they envisage for the future. To play that role, teachers have to become aware of their own historicity and subjectivity; they have to model the discursive vigilance and circumspection with language that they want their students to acquire. For this, they have to create alliances not only with other teachers of literature, history, art or other foreign languages in their own institutions or country, but also with those who teach the same language in other countries, e.g., teachers of French in Sweden, Germany, Russia and the U.S. They have to keep abreast of research in a variety of disciplines, not

just psycholinguistics and second language acquisition research. And they
need to go abroad and compare the meaning of democracy in various coun-
tries and come to their own conclusions.

Some will argue that it is not the purpose of language instruction to
discuss worldviews, but that too is a political stance worth discussing.
Others will argue that the misunderstanding between Rob and Marie
was due to the nature of computer-mediated communication, and that
free exchanges like this one should be avoided. This argument should be
taken seriously and the value of a tighter pedagogic structure should be
carefully considered, but the medium only makes visible what takes place
under the surface of seemingly more innocuous encounters. It offers a
rich source of memorable experiential learning that can be interpreted
and discussed.

Finally some might argue that it is asking too much of language teach-
ers to know all that is needed to fully make sense of the exchange above,
and that the danger of stereotypes makes any discussion of it even more
harmful than the original misunderstanding. I believe that the kind of re-
flective and critical pedagogy advocated by Freeman and Johnson, Rea-
gan, Luke, and Kubota, that I discussed at the beginning of this article,
takes this danger into account. Rather than pretending we all have the
same communicative goals (e.g., exchange of information and the solving
of practical communication problems), we should face the fact that we
very often do not share the same communicative goals nor even the same
definition of the communicative situation. Teachers, therefore, together
with their students, have to engage critically with the material and be ready
to discover new potential meanings as they go along. It is this voyage of
discovery that makes language teaching the exciting and ever renewed
endeavor that it is.

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