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Neoliberal Foreign Language Education: The Search for Alternatives¹

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Introduction

Neoliberalism – the latest mutation of capitalism (Dardot & Laval, 2014; Harvey, 2007) – does a lot of ideological work in directing our everyday social lives and practices toward the (naturalized) logics and rules of the market. Language learning and teaching are no exception to this.

Adopting different theoretical lenses and drawing on different research theories and methods, critical work in and about education has discussed the effects of neoliberalism in terms of the deskilling of teachers (Apple, 2003; Muffoletto, 2001), the marketization of educational institutions, and in particular universities (Fairclough, 1993), the marketization of learning in the knowledge economy (Ford, 2021), the growing body of utilitarian policies and economic approaches to education (Down et al., 2017), the commercialization of (language) competence tests for the workplace (Okuda, 2019), and the shaping of learners' and teachers' identities as entrepreneurs (Fernández Liria et al., 2017; Gupta, 2019), just to name a few. An exhaustive examination of these issues is not only needed for a critique of mainstream/general education but also for a critique of (foreign) language education.

One of the main foci of critical research in language education in recent years has been to examine the influence of neoliberalism on the teaching, learning and promotion of foreign languages, especially English (Block et al., 2012; O.Z. Barnawi, 2017; Flubacher & Del Percio, 2017a; see also special issues edited by Bernstein et al., 2015a; Shin & Park, 2016; Gray et al., 2018), but also other languages such as Spanish (see the monograph edited by Bruzos, 2020a). While the body of critical research addressing the complex connections between neoliberalism and foreign language education is certainly growing, there is still scarce research compared to an abundant number of publications that explicitly or implicitly exclude neoliberalism from the bigger picture of language learning and teaching in order to orient to more “practical” or “descriptive” issues.

This Special Issue entitled “Alternatives to Neoliberal Foreign Language Education” seeks to contribute to the existing critical literature in the field. In providing a collection of studies

¹ This is a pre-publication Draft.

that conceptually and empirically approach the effects of neoliberalism in foreign language teaching and learning, the authors identify and discuss potential alternatives to neoliberal values, rationalities and practices in foreign language education. “Alternative” here refers to any more or less organized set of actions, discourses, policies, or other activities which seek to defy, contest, or counterbalance – in different ways and to different extents – the neoliberal agenda of education. Alternatives, then, occur at different levels (micro-, meso-, macro-), are initiated by different stakeholders (teachers, students, policymakers, educational authorities, governments) and pertain to different educational spaces, artifacts, and practices (language programs, language materials such as textbooks, foreign language policy discourse, learning and teaching methods, among others).

Whether critical alternatives are indeed effective responses to neoliberalism in education requires both conceptual and empirical examination; this is one of the main reasons why this Special Issue hopes to make a contribution to the fields of (foreign) language education, applied linguistics, language policy, and other related disciplines with a critical orientation to contemporary education and educational practices.

The papers in this issue address neoliberalism and foreign language education in particular geographical and geopolitical contexts (i.e. South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Iran) and delineate a particular object of study as an “alternative” (e.g., educational policy and practice, the conventionalized use of dialogue in foreign language classrooms, transnational teachers’ narratives, official policy documents and foreign language textbooks). Given the dominant position of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) as a medium of instruction in global neoliberal education, and as a *lingua economica* in international and transnational institutions (Phillipson, 2008), it might come as no surprise that, in one way or another, all studies address EFL. However, they also look at the broader local/regional language environment by discussing English in relation to local languages and to other foreign languages taught.

The following sections will briefly discuss three key effects of neoliberalism in education which will serve to contextualize the individual contribution of each paper as well as the collective contribution of the Special Issue, namely: *(foreign) language as a skill*, *standardization and profit*, and *devaluing education*. Then, we will move on to explain our focus of analysis: *alternatives to neoliberalism in foreign language education*.

Language as a skill

One of the most evident neoliberal effects is the widespread view of language as a skill for pursuing pragmatic purposes such as economic benefits and upward social mobility (Kubota, 2011, 2016). Neoliberal discourses and practices in education perpetuate a view of language as a decontextualized skill, without connecting it to its cultural and social dimensions and implications. Kubota (2011) refers to this as “linguistic instrumentalism,” an approach that highlights the utmost importance of language skills for achieving economic advancement and as capital for professional and geographical mobility (Aydarova, 2016; T.T.T. Nguyen, 2021). This highly instrumental and pragmatic conception of language teaching and language learning is closely linked to human capital theory, a cornerstone of neoliberal educational policy (Holborow, 2018). This theory, popularized by Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964), understands human knowledge as a commodity that each person, organization or country possesses to compete with others. Following this logic, those individuals that develop the knowledge required by the market will have advantages over their competitors and will achieve greater economic benefits.

In the context of the so-called “knowledge economy” where intellectual capabilities have taken over the place previously occupied by physical capabilities for production/productivity, knowing a foreign language becomes an important “soft skill” to improve the human capital of individuals (Urciuoli, 2008). Learning a language becomes an investment for individuals to have more and better possibilities in the world of work (Gao & Park, 2015; Park, 2010), and some foreign languages are valued more than others to enhance competitiveness in the global job market, English being the most valued language (M. H. Nguyen, 2019; Price, 2014; Shin, 2016). However, the actual profitability of foreign languages for better job opportunities is unclear, as there are several contextual factors at stake (Holborow, 2018).

Standardization and profit

Human capital theory promotes the idea that what is done and what is learned must be “scientifically” assessed to measure its economic output. Along these lines, the conception of language as a skill makes measuring language learning “possible” since “skills are assumed to be segmentable, testable, and rankable” (Urciuoli, 2008, p. 212). A key role in this project has been played by educational documents such as the Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century (SFFLL) by the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (1996) and the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) by the Council of Europe (2001), which provide standardized parameters to measure the knowledge of a language. In so doing, these metrics, descriptors and items used for evaluation and assessment purposes alienate the learner – and their use of the language – from the very sociopolitical contexts in which learning takes place (Canale, 2022).

The effects of these standardized practices go beyond language evaluation and assessment. The CEFR, for example, is used in many European countries and beyond this continent for designing language courses, developing and selecting teaching materials (Byram & Parmenter, 2012; Savski, 2020), thus promoting “teaching to the test” practices (Huang, 2019). In addition, the CEFR has also become a brand to sell language products such as textbooks and examinations (Littlejohn, 2012).

Indeed, language education, especially EFL, has become a multi-million dollar business for the so-called English-language industry in the era of neoliberal globalization (Philipson, 1992; O.Z. Barnawi, 2017). In fact, the penetration of neoliberal ideas, values and mentalities which support the standardization of language learning and teaching for “greater profit” has also caused many language departments and programs around the world to be geared toward meeting the needs of the business sector in such a way that “decisions as to which languages should be taught and for what purposes have escaped the hands of many teachers and students and are instead driven by profit-oriented principles of marketing experts” (Ennsner-Kananen et al., 2017, p. 16).

Devaluing education

In this neoliberalized scenario, language teachers undergo a de-professionalization of their teaching and a precarization of their labor conditions (Flubacher & Del Percio, 2017b), as they are increasingly conceived as skill providers and technicians who do not need to possess or demonstrate any personal pedagogical criteria (Block & Gray, 2016; Villacañas de Castro et al., 2018).

Concomitantly, language learners are positioned as self-entrepreneurs and consumers (Bernstein et al., 2015b; Simpson, 2018): learning a foreign language is discursively constructed as a project of constant self-improvement (Shin, 2016), and as a form of investment in oneself to be more competitive in the educational and work fields. This is accompanied by the loss of influence on language education from disciplines such as literature, grammar or translation (Bruzos, 2020b), in favor of approaches that promote day-to-day, global communication, and especially consumption practices and self-management skills in a neoliberal society.

The critical examination of English language teaching (ELT) materials has been key to understanding the effect of the global market in promoting individualism, entrepreneurship and consumerism (Babaii & Sheikhi, 2018; Bori, 2020; Gray, 2010). However, a similar neoliberal approach has been found in teaching and learning materials for other languages such as French (Block & Gray, 2018) and Spanish (Bori & Kuzmanovic Jovanović, 2020, 2021). In fact, even materials produced for languages with little international projection, such as Catalan (Bori, 2018), also draw on these hegemonic discourses and practices.

Focusing on alternatives

What are potential ways out of neoliberalism in foreign language education? What alternative ideological spaces can be designed? How – and to what extent – can these spaces secure educational transformation? What problems do these alternatives encounter around the world? How can these alternatives be critically assessed? How – and to what extent – can local alternatives migrate to other places? These are some of the key points this Special Issue addresses.

While there is a growing body of scholarship on the neoliberal orientation to foreign language education, the examination of alternatives to the dominant neoliberal conception of language teaching and learning is a much less explored field of study. Among the few exceptions to this trend are the studies about critical pedagogy practices that have been implemented by various teachers in their language classrooms to counter dominant neoliberal discourses (Chun, 2009, 2013; Villacañas de Castro et al., 2018; O. Barnawi, 2019; Bori, 2022). These studies point to two interesting issues: (a) neoliberal language education manifests itself in various ways in different parts of the world, and as such, it needs to be countered with locally-sensitive practices, which are able to take into account the sociopolitical context of each classroom; (b) resistance to neoliberal language education can not only be left in the hands of individuals; it is necessary to promote alternative discourses and practices at meso and macro levels as well. With these two points in mind, this special issue puts together a collection of papers that will hopefully encourage others to join the search for alternatives to the currently dominant neoliberal approach to foreign language education.

Overview and contribution of the special issue

In the first paper of this collection, Littlejohn discusses conventionalized dialogue in the foreign language classroom and the role it has played in reproducing a neoliberal agenda by positioning learners as consumers who reproduce linguistic and communicative behaviors and teachers as deskilled operatives of scripted interactions. The author delineates potentially alternative conceptualizations of dialogue: “natural language use” and “exploratory talk.” However, Littlejohn argues that neither one of these alternatives are effective in countering

neoliberal language teaching and learning. Echoing Freire's conceptualization of dialogue as a potentially transformatory tool, he presents emancipatory pedagogy and dialogic teaching as potentially effective alternative. In his discussion, Littlejohn critically examines the structural changes this alternative would require in terms of curriculum and pedagogy and also anticipates potential limitations.

In the second paper, Park argues for the need to look into the nexus of neoliberalism and coloniality – in terms of colonial capitalism – in order to envision potential alternatives to the growing neoliberalization of foreign language education. Park examines the discursive and ideological orders of educational reform in South Korea and argues that subjectivity plays a key role in reinforcing the neoliberal/colonial nexus. Using a “lecturementary” (documentary segments framed as lectures) as an illustrative example, the author finds that discussions over some facets and manifestations of neoliberalism in education tend to obscure its nexus with coloniality. In light of this, he claims for alternatives to neoliberalism in foreign language education not to overfocus on novel pedagogic models or educational policies but to concentrate on local subjectivities and experiences and how they can help to cultivate alternative epistemologies to counter neoliberal and colonial forces.

In the third paper, Babaii addresses current educational policy in Iran and the local design of ELT textbooks for secondary education. Her discussion reveals that Iranian education aims to provide English lessons to students while avoiding market-oriented discourse in ELT. Unlike the general trend of neoliberal global ELT materials, Iranian ELT textbooks, for example, do not include references to consumerism, celebrities or advertisements. However, the author points out several aspects such as a high degree of “essentialism,” lack of respect for diversity and absence of critical thinking activities in textbooks. In her view, these issues make the Iranian model not a desirable alternative to the neoliberal ELT education. Babaii concludes her article with a call to build an alternative to neoliberalism in ELT through a constructive and respectful dialogue, including divergent opinions.

In the fourth paper, Barnawi explores how transnational English language teachers in Saudi Arabia open alternative pedagogical spaces to resist neoliberal EFL in their everyday teaching practices. The analysis of interview data and teachers' reflective journals reveal that all three teachers share an awareness of some of the negative effects of neoliberalized ELT practices and that they share an interest in finding ways to counter such effects. Each teacher designs particular strategies to resist neoliberalism in ELT: extensive reading (to counter materials with highly idealized and naturalized neoliberal values, positions and ideologies), “father-son” conversations (as a means to create an informal, more relaxed and less competitive atmosphere to discuss how competitiveness in education leads to their distress, anxieties and fears), and portfolio reflection letters (through which a culture of solidarity is fostered among students).

Individually, each article contributes with a situated, contextualized and critical view of neoliberalism in foreign language education. Collectively, all papers reflect on potential macro- meso- and micro- alternatives to neoliberalism – and their entanglements – in foreign language education by analyzing policies, teaching and learning methods, official documents, textbooks, and everyday classroom practices; they also critically assess the limitations of these alternatives. In so doing, the Special Issue hopes to contribute to a critical discussion of the problems researchers, teachers, policymakers and other stakeholders encounter when attempting to open spaces to implement alternatives to neoliberalism in foreign language

education, as well as the key role these spaces may play in designing ideologically creative tools to move from resistance to transformation.

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