

---

studies of canonical works seen under new perspectives with topics often considered marginal. The more tangential or unusual the approach, the more illuminating it can be.

---

Thomas Szende. *The Foreign Language Appropriation Conundrum: Micro Realities & Macro Dynamics*. Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2016. 276 p.

LOUISE STOEHR

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY

In *The Foreign Language Appropriation Conundrum*, Thomas Szende addresses critical issues of foreign- and second-language teaching in our globalized world of the twenty-first century. Clearly passionate about language teaching, he takes care to position concerns about classroom practices and the increasing reliance on technology (called “micro realities”) in relation to the myriad external cultural, political, and institutional forces (“macro dynamics”) that influence attitudes toward language learning. At a time when the legitimacy of foreign languages as an academic endeavor in the United States is being challenged and dismissed as mere “skill building” by those who make critical decisions regarding core curriculum at state universities and colleges, Szende’s study is a welcome contribution to the debate on the importance of multilingualism in our globalized society.

His central argument is that language is not separate from culture. He first argues that “the plurality of language and culture is part of the dynamics of humanity” (13) and continues to observe that language teaching “is to fully enter into all that defines language as a socially appropriate tool” and that it reflects the society in which it is spoken (21). Teaching a foreign language, then, means to broaden the horizons of language learners, as well as to guide them toward being able to move beyond the boundaries of their native language and culture as they learn to “see the world through the lens of the Other and thus to see themselves more clearly” (42).

Szende’s respect for languages and cultures, especially those from marginalized or non-dominant communities of speakers, shines through in his considerations about the relative status of local and imposed languages in former colonies. Repeatedly, he points out the importance of “political, economic, cultural, and other power[s]” that determine the value assigned to a particular language (38). In this context, he expresses legitimate concern about the linguistic hegemony of English brought about by globalization, as well as to the migrations of peoples due to forces of globalization and war. He suggests that migration, its “linguistic consequences,” and the dichotomy of disrespect by the host culture for unskilled, uneducated migrants

---

juxtaposed against the respect for “elite,” educated migrants, are major twenty-first century concerns (27).

Set against the backdrop of international concerns about languages and their perceived value, much of the book examines the roles of the language teacher and the learners in a world of ubiquitous technology. He views it as the teacher’s responsibility to use the methodology suitable to her/his local situation “(1) to expose learners to (linguistic and cultural) alterity and 2) to bring learners to analyze their relationship to the Other” (237). Szende reiterates the critical importance of learner autonomy, the learner’s personal responsibility for learning, the importance of the learner being invested in the project, clearly concluding that “the mere act of being exposed to the input does not mean that it will retain the learner’s focus or that they will be able to exploit or internalize it for the purpose of acquisition” (194). Likewise, he reassures the reader that technology of itself “cannot guarantee quality” (236) and that good language teaching requires good language teachers. He raises a particularly good question asking if there will be people and languages excluded from the “information society” (133).

Two aspects in the section dedicated to teaching language are of particular note. First is the emphasis that metalinguistic knowledge is equally important as communicative tasks “because to learn, foreign language students must be able to understand” (163) and adult learners can use knowledge of their native language and other foreign languages to assist their acquisition of the target language. He is clear, however, that he considers metalinguistic knowledge useful only insofar as it furthers the project of language learning and that the use of emerging language skills, as practiced for example in task-based learning scenarios, are essential to furthering students’ communication skills and enhancing their critical thinking skills (186). The second aspect is his positive evaluation of translation, which he considers to be “the fifth competence” and one that “reveals the richness of languages along with the differences and analogies between them” (169), pointing out that there would be no need to learn a foreign language if it functioned just as one’s native language did.

Alongside the many positive aspects of this volume, there are unfortunately several impediments to a smooth reading experience. Particularly in the initial chapters, the narrative is often difficult to follow, as it appears to change from one topic to the next unsystematically, often repeating themes from an earlier section. With its wealth of information, this portion of the book would have benefitted from more stringent copy editing. Fortunately, in later sections of the volume, the major themes come together into a cohesive whole.

Even the title of the book was at first jarring with its use of the word

---

*appropriation*. In my studies on the topic of appropriation, linguistic and cultural, I have seen this term given a rather negative connotation, implying theft of a non-dominant group's language for re-use by the dominant language often at the expense of the non-dominant group. While the author explains his choice of this term with the inexact distinction between the terms "language learning" vs. "language acquisition" (22), he himself often relies on the terms "learning" and "acquisition" to describe the phenomenon of gaining skill in another language.

Moreover, using European acronyms without an initial introduction to the terms could make for an occasionally bumpy reading experience. And finally, the author's Europe-centric perspective suggests that what is true for linguistic diversity in Europe, i.e., that it "is an intrinsic and historical component of Europe as a geopolitical entity and cultural construction" (25), holds true for the rest of the world. Yet this is not the perceived value placed on foreign languages in the United States, giving the reader based in the United States a sense of alienation.

Overall, however, these concerns are minor in comparison to the valuable contribution Szende makes to second-language acquisition literature. *The Foreign Language Appropriate Conundrum* is rich with critical examinations of political and cultural influences that determine the perceived value of foreign-language study in general as well as study of specific languages in particular. Likewise, he pulls together research on language teaching the world over. He issues an impassioned plea for the profession to continually examine our classroom practices and motivations, and to give consideration to how we can best help our students achieve their greatest potential in learning language as we simultaneously deal with the political and cultural realities that determine even which languages we are able to share with our students.

In conclusion, Szende's book provides a necessary reminder that the situation of language teaching as we experience it in the United States is indeed not the norm when compared with the value placed on multilingualism in Europe, Africa, and large regions of Asia (41). We are additionally reminded that, despite the view of some educational governing bodies that foreign language competencies are mere skills, in fact "language teaching/learning interacts with many disciplines" (42) and that when we understand other languages and their cultures, only then do we begin to understand ourselves. I would recommend that this volume be read by those who make decisions about educational policy for language learning at all levels in the United States, for we are evidently out of step with the rest of the world.