Blending Spaces: Mediating and Assessing Intercultural Competence in the L2 Classroom

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Blending Spaces: Mediating and Assessing Intercultural Competence in the L2 Classroom			
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With the vast amount of second language learners across the world in various contexts and the ever-present force of globalization, it becomes essential to acknowledge the interaction of differing sociocultural and linguistic practices at play in second language (L2) learning. In doing so, a learner of a new linguistic code can gradually come to use both their first and second languages appropriately through the medium of a third space between each system. Witte discusses the unique situation of L2 learners when faced with a new, possibly competing linguistic system and culture, in such a way that would benefit both educators and researchers alike. He explains the challenges that a foreign language learner faces in having two competing rhetorical traditions, and he explains the interactions of these languages in a third space where reconciliation takes place in new and interesting forms. This book meticulously and gradually builds on both first and second language development in order to construct the understanding of what intercultural competence could mean.

Throughout the book, Witte discusses the necessity to instruct beyond simply the linguistic system of a foreign language, and to build intercultural awareness and

competence as well. He provides a prolific explanation of the process of merging constructs within the context of second language acquisition, and he explains that it is through this spatial metaphor of a blending third space that students can construct their own subjectivity within and between languages, societies, and cultures. While this author does critique the current state of blended space theory as limiting, particularly in regards to essential human conditions, he does use the original concept of Fauconnier and Turner as a more inclusive theory. He argues that the knowledge of this construct will enable the learner to be more linguistically competent, while also preparing them for heteroglosia and countless interactions that build a coherent societal validity, essentially creating a shared responsibility between people and cultures. Therefore, Witte believes that an empathetic understanding is the best approach, which for an L2 learner to encapsulate and understand the target culture in this manner, s/he must be willing to depart from their familiar native culture in order to see it from the critical perspective of the other. The author stresses the significance of reflection on the continuum between first language (L1) and L2 in a blended space where L2 learners can transform not only their linguistic and cultural understandings but also their fundamental identity, emotions, and cognition.

The author tackles the ambiguous concept of identity and its fluid relationship to others, its dependence on collective identities, and its need for validation. He points out that learning a foreign language can drastically build and shape an individual learner's identity, particularly in the sense of socialization. Witte goes on to explain that the familial socialization is primary, followed by secondary socialization typically in some form of schooling, which would make learning a foreign language analogous to that of a formative tertiary socialization. Additionally, he points out the new and growing ability to access information on different cultures and places digitally, builds the possibility of individual narration of identity and gives way to the pluralization of identities as well.

Witte accomplishes his goal of providing a solid theoretically based set of principles specifically for L2 learners in the development of a blended third space. This book fills a void in regards to a theoretical model that explains the interplay of languages and sociocultural contexts that an L2 learner experiences. Through his chronological organization of the book, Witte gives a cogent explanation first of L1 then of L2 acquisition, and it provides a basis of understanding for how learners negotiate meaning between the two. The benefits of this text are vast, particularly in regards to engaged L2 learners, the instructors of such a learners, and researchers in the fields of second language acquisition, linguistics, education, etc. Additionally, this information could be applied beyond the realm of second language learning to benefit similar arenas, such as Intercultural Rhetoric (Connor, 2011), or tutoring services (Thonus, 2004).

The explanations of hybridity and blending spaces, which this book gives, offer language learners in various contexts insights into their thinking and processing of opposing constructs and how to disseminate information. It provides learners with a space to explore the differences between the two cultures in a safe/non-threatening manner, while still providing them with the opportunity to fully explore rhetorical differences and various identities at play. This builds on the learner's ability to reflect not only on the new culture and language, but also on her/his own.

In regards to instructors of languages, this text has the ability to guide curriculum instruction to enable a higher level of cultural empathy, not only in students, but in teachers as well. It also gives a framework for instructors to help these learners to construct their own knowledge, instead of simply providing them with the content. It encourages teachers to build their classroom as a community of practice, with rich experiential learning opportunities.

Finally, for researchers, the implications of this book are far reaching. With this foundational text, and despite Kramsch's (2012) argument that the spatial theory of third spaces is highly linear and static, Witte demonstrated the ability of this theory of blending spaces to be a more inclusive metaphor. The most salient possibility is the way in which this text builds on recent understandings of Translingualism (Canagarajah, 2013) where L2 learners may incorporate all language practices that they are aware of, to develop a new and interesting type of personal rhetoric. Witte explains that while this creativity and personal/internal speech do take place within the blended third space, he also maintains that the learner must understand how to appropriately work within the culturally acceptable constructs of each linguistic community. Unlike pure Translingualism, this concept of the third space enables teachers to justify exposing students to standard cultural and linguistic constructs, which may help in instructing languages with difficult power dynamics.

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