

Language and culture as curricular content

This chapter:

- examines how language and culture are treated as curricular content in classrooms based on a sociocultural perspective;
- describes some pedagogical approaches that incorporate current understandings of language and culture into their curricular and instructional designs;
- offers a list of additional readings on the topics covered in this chapter.

6.1 Introduction

Several popular practices for teaching language and culture in applied linguistics have evolved from traditional perspectives on language and learning. These include the Natural Approach (Krashen and Terrell, 1983), developed in the early 1980s as an extension of Chomsky's linguistic theory of language, and cognitive approaches such as focus-on-form instruction (e.g. Doughty and Williams, 1998) and TBLT (task-based language teaching) (e.g. Ellis, 2003; Samuda and Bygate, 2008).

While these approaches differ in terms of, for example, the role that interaction is thought to play in language learning and the degree and kind of instructional intervention they call for, they are similar in that they all give primacy to linguistic structures in forming the curricular content of language classrooms. Moreover, they agree that even though the process of acquiring linguistic structures is influenced primarily by learners' internal grammar, there is a role for instruction. Specifically, they agree that instruction should create opportunities in the classroom that facilitate learners' abilities to make use of general cognitive processing capacities to

speed up the rate at which learners gain control of the linguistic forms in an otherwise naturally occurring, internally driven process.

Understandings of language and culture embodied in a sociocultural perspective are quite different from those embodied in more traditional perspectives and these differences have given rise to different conceptualisations of curricular content in language classrooms. The purpose of this chapter is to present an overview of how language and culture as content are dealt with from a sociocultural perspective, to discuss concerns with defining norms and standards for learning raised by this perspective, and to consider pedagogical approaches that incorporate current understandings of language, culture and learning into their curricular and instructional designs.

6.2 Defining knowledge of language and culture

6.2.1 Communicative competence

An early attempt in applied linguistics to define the content of language classrooms from a sociocultural perspective for the purposes of curriculum design is Canale and Swain's framework of **communicative competence**, proposed in 1980. The concept of communicative competence was first made popular by Dell Hymes (cf. [Chapter 1](#)) in the mid-1960s as an alternative to the concept of linguistic competence, as first proposed by Chomsky (1965, 1966). According to Chomsky's theory of language, individuals are born with a universal grammar, a mental blueprint for processing and generating language. Presumed to be a fixed property of mind, the capacity for language is defined as sets of principles and conditions from which the grammatical rules for language systems are derived. Chomsky proposed the concept of linguistic competence to capture those sets of principles, conditions and rules for generating the structural components of a language, which any 'speaker of a language knows implicitly' (1966: 9).

For Hymes, who considered social function to be the source of linguistic form, Chomsky's definition of language knowledge was inadequate in that it could not account for the knowledge and skills that individuals must have to understand and produce utterances appropriate to the particular cultural contexts in which they occur. Drawing on rich ethnographic data on language use from a variety of social groups, Hymes called for a significantly different understanding of competence that included the knowledge and ability to use linguistic resources in communicative contexts constitutive of the different groups and communities of which individuals are members.

He coined the term 'communicative competence' to refer to these capacities and defined it in terms of four dimensions. The first, **systemic**

potential, involves knowledge and use of language that is formally possible. The second dimension is **appropriateness**, which is knowledge of and ability to use language that is ‘adequate, happy, successful in relation to a context’ (Widdowson, 2007: 210). The third dimension, **probability**, refers to knowledge and use of language that actually occurs. So, in addition to knowledge of what can be possible grammatically, communicative competence entails knowing what is likely to occur. The last dimension, **feasibility**, refers to the extent to which something is practical. An utterance that has several relative clauses may be grammatical but not very feasible. Of particular importance is the fact that, for Hymes, the development of communicative competence was defined in terms of accessibility rather than considered to be an innate trait.

Quote 6.1 On the link between knowledge and ability in communicative competence

Knowledge also is to be understood as subtending all four parameters of communication just noted. There is knowledge of each. Ability for use also may relate to all four parameters. Certainly, it may be the case that individuals differ with regard to ability to use knowledge of each: to interpret, differentiate, etc. The specification of ability for use as part of competence allows for the role of non-cognitive factors, such as motivations, as partly determining competence.

Hymes (1972b: 282–283)

Canale and Swain (1980) were among the first in applied linguistics to use Hymes’s notion of communicative competence to design a framework for second and foreign language curriculum and evaluation. Their initial model of communicative competence contained three components: **grammatical**, which included knowledge of lexical items and rules of morphology, syntax, semantics and phonology; **sociolinguistic**, which included knowledge of the rules of language use; and **strategic**, which included knowledge of strategies to compensate for breakdowns in communication.

Acknowledging that their initial model was more concerned with oral language use, Canale (1982) added a fourth component, **discourse competence**, which dealt with the knowledge needed to participate in literacy activities. According to Canale and Swain, choices for what to include in a curriculum for language classrooms were to be based on an analysis of the specific features of each of the four components comprising those communicative activities in which learners of additional languages were interested in becoming competent.

While others in the field (e.g. Bachman, 1990; Bachman and Palmer, 1996) have presented similar constructs, they have been used mainly for

the design of language tests. Up until the mid-1990s, the Canale and Swain model remained the principal framework in discussions on curricula for language classrooms. In 1995, Celce-Murcia, Dornyei and Thurrell proposed four changes to the model: they added **sociocultural competence** as a fifth component; they changed sociolinguistic competence to **sociocultural competence** to include the cultural knowledge to use and interpret language use appropriately; they changed grammatical competence to **linguistic competence** to encompass the sound system and the lexicon in addition to morphology and syntax; and they explained the interrelatedness of the concept's five components.

6.2.2 Interactional competence

As sociocultural perspectives became more firmly planted in the field, limitations of the concept of communicative competence were becoming visible. Critics (e.g. Young, 2000; Lüdi, 2006; McNamara and Roever, 2006) noted, for example, that despite their sociocultural origins, the components were often treated as static, innate properties of individuals, thereby rendering invisible their social foundations. They also noted that when framing oral activities, discussions of the components were focused on competence for speaking and not on competence for interaction. In a prescient essay Kramsch (1986) critiqued the proficiency guidelines of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), a US-based organisation dedicated to foreign language teaching and learning, claiming that they emphasised accuracy over other skills and thus took an 'oversimplified view on human interactions' (p. 367). She ended by proposing the concept of **interactional competence** to capture the skills and knowledge needed for successful interaction.

By the 1990s elaborations and investigations of the concept were on the rise (e.g. Hall, 1993b, 1995, 1999; Young, 2000). The incorporation of conversation analysis and its methods by applied linguists into their studies of communicative activities (cf. [Chapter 1](#)) helped to elaborate and further refine the concept of interactional competence and it has since informed much research on the competences involved in formal and informal contexts of learning. Nguyen (2004, 2006), for example, investigated changes in the interactional competences of two pharmacy students over the course of their participation in a pharmacy internship. Similarly, Rine (2009) used the concept to investigate changes in the interactional competences of an international teaching assistant through his participation in a professional development course. It has also informed pedagogy in formal school contexts (e.g. Wong, 2002; Wong and Waring, 2010) and professional development in settings such as the health care and business fields (e.g. Heritage and Maynard, 2006; Nielsen, 2009).

Quote 6.2 Definition of interactional competence

Interactional competence includes 'knowledge of culture-specific communicative events or activity types and their typical goals and trajectories of actions by which the goals are realized. Also included is knowledge of the prosodic, linguistic, interactional and other verbal and nonverbal tools conventionally used to infer meanings of turns and actions, to construct them so that they are interpreted by others in ways that they are intended to be, and to anticipate and produce larger action sequence configurations.

Hall (2009: 3)

6.2.3 Communicative competence revisited

In light of the burgeoning research on interactional competence and further advancements in research on language development (cf. [Chapter 3](#)), in 2007, Celce-Murcia revised the 1995 model of communicative competence. The current version is depicted in [Figure 6.1](#). It includes six interrelated

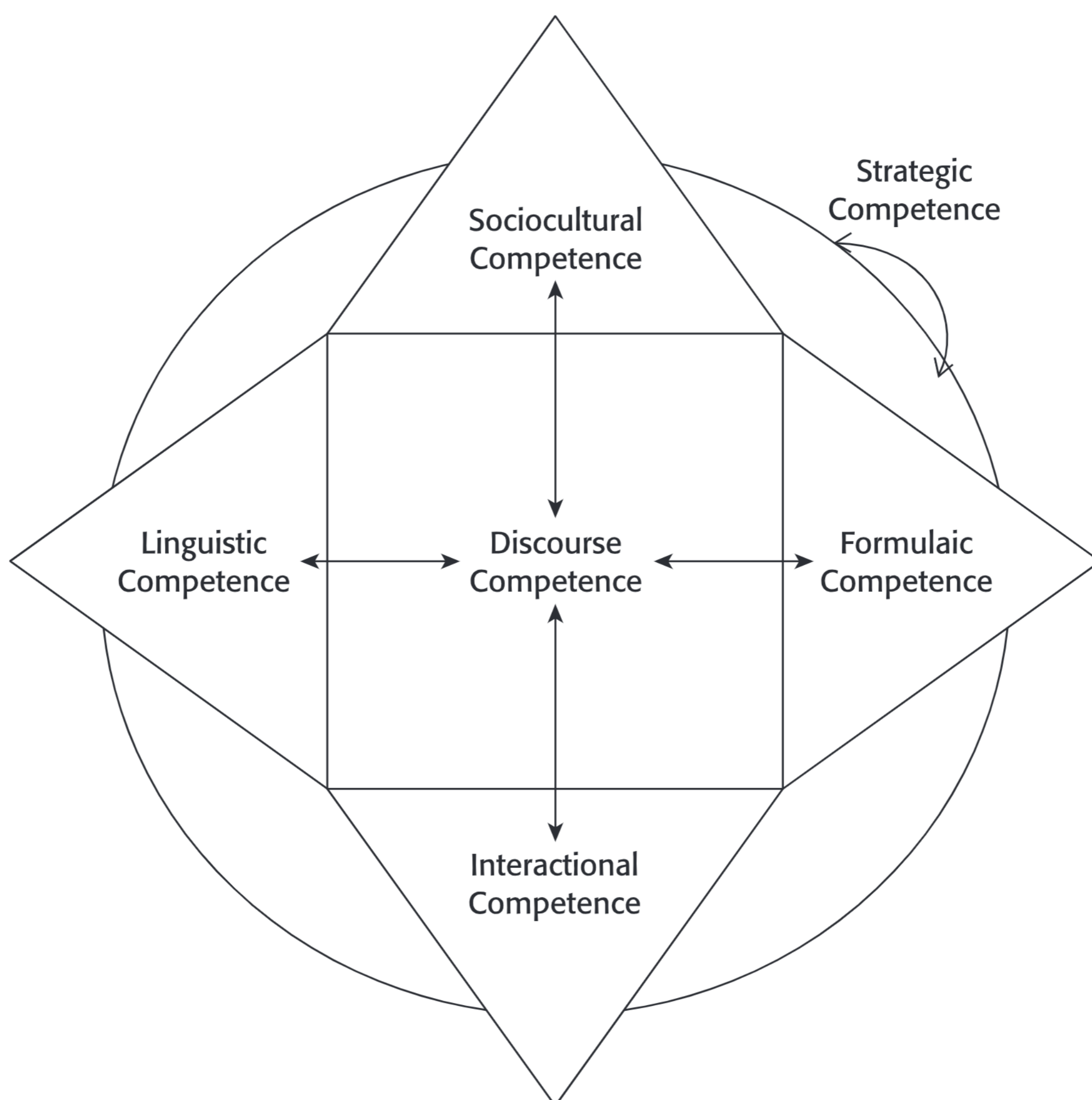


Figure 6.1 *Model of communicative competence* (Celce-Murcia, 2007: 45)

dimensions of communicative competence: sociocultural, discourse, linguistic, formulaic, interactional and strategic.

Retained in this model are sociocultural competence, discourse competence and linguistic competence. Added as a counterbalance to linguistic competence is the fourth component, **formulaic competence**. Defined as ‘prefabricated chunks of language that speakers use heavily in everyday interactions’ (Celce-Murcia, 2007: 47), this component includes knowledge of fixed phrases and various types of collocations, idioms and lexical frames. Examples in English include fixed phrases such as ‘of course’ and ‘all of a sudden’; collocations such as ‘spend money’ (verb-noun) and ‘forever young’ (adverb-adjective), and lexical frames such as ‘see you (tomorrow, later, etc.).’

Another added component is **interactional competence**. It consists of three related components: actional competence, which is knowledge of how to perform speech acts and speech act sets; conversational competence, which includes how to open and close conversations, how to establish and change topics, and so on; and non-verbal/paralinguistic competence, which includes knowledge of kinesics, proxemics, haptics and non-linguistic resources such as pausing, silence and so on. Weaving through these five components is strategic competence, which was in the earlier model, but here is expanded to include two types of strategies: learning strategies and communication strategies. Learning strategies comprise the cognitive, meta-cognitive and memory-related behaviours that individuals use to enhance their own learning. Communication strategies include the knowledge and skills to resolve communicative difficulties and enhance communicative effectiveness.

The notion of communicative competence helps us to see that language use involves not just knowledge of and ability to use language forms. It also involves knowledge and ability to use language in ways that are, to use Hymes’s terms, socially appropriate, feasible and contextually called for. The many attempts to conceptualise the various socially constituted dimensions of our communicative resources with this concept in mind have helped in the design of curricula for language classrooms by providing blueprints for identifying the substance of the communicative plans that more experienced participants use to guide their participation in activities and events. As such, they have provided some basis for making principled decisions about the curricular content of language classrooms.

6.2.4 Intercultural communicative competence

Alongside attempts to create an adequate framework for conceptualising the knowledge, skills and abilities that are tied to our communicative actions is the work on **intercultural communicative competence (ICC)**. Made popular by Byram (1997) and his colleagues (Byram and Zarate, 1997; Byram and Fleming, 1998), this concept was developed as an

expansion of communicative competence in response to what Byram argued was the need to consider the competence that learners of additional languages develop to be qualitatively different from the competence that members develop as native speakers of social groups and communities. Learners of other languages, he argued, should be treated not as aspiring native speakers but as developing intercultural communicators.

To capture the knowledge and skills that users of more than one language develop, Byram (1997, 2008) proposed the concept of intercultural communicative competence. He defined it as the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to participate in activities where the target language is the primary communicative code and in situations where it is the common code for those with different preferred languages. Specific components of ICC include the following, grouped into five dimensions:

- *Savoir-être*: general attitudinal dispositions. These include a curiosity with and openness to difference, a readiness to suspend disbelief and judgement with respect to others' meanings, beliefs and behaviours, and a willingness to understand and be sensitive to the perspectives of others;
- *Savoirs*: knowledge of relevant sociocultural groups and their significant communicative practices and products;
- *Savoir-comprendre*: skills of identification, interpretation and analysis of patterns, perspectives and potential sources of miscommunication and incompatibilities. Also included are skills for negotiating agreement in places of conflict and acceptance of differences and incompatibilities;
- *Savoir-apprendre*: skills to communicate with others in conventional or expected ways at the levels of both the individual and group. Also included is the ability to sort through, reflect on and use one's understanding of the differences and similarities across individuals and across groups to form open, flexible communicative plans and perspectives;
- *Savoir s'engager*: skills to evaluate critically from 'a rational and explicit standpoint' (Byram, 1997: 54) one's own perspectives, practices and products and those of other sociocultural groups.

Referring to this last component as **trans-cultural competence**, Lussier (2007) expands its parameters to include 'the integration of new values, the respect of other values and the valorization of otherness which derives from the coexistence of different ethnic groups and cultures evolving in a same society or in distinct societies while advocating the enrichment of identity of each culture in contact' (p. 324).

A pedagogy based on ICC focuses on developing in learners 'the capability to exchange meaning in communication with people across languages and cultures in a way that foregrounds their positioning in the language and culture that they are learning' (Scarino, 2010: 325). Ultimately, it leads to the development of the intercultural citizen, that is, 'a social agent active

in a multicultural society, whether “national–state” or international polity’ (Byram, 2010: 320).

Quote 6.3 Goals of an intercultural orientation to language teaching

An *intercultural* orientation to teaching languages seeks the transformation of students’ identities in the act of learning. This is achieved on the part of students through a constant referencing of the language being learned with their own language(s) and culture(s). In so doing, students decenter from their linguistic and cultural world to consider their own situatedness from the perspective of another. They learn to constantly move between their linguistic and cultural world and that of the users of the target language. In this process, they come to understand culture not only as information about diverse people and their practices but also, and most importantly, as the contextual framework that people use to exchange meaning in communication with others and through which they understand their social world.

Scarino (2010: 324)

Like its companion concept, communicative competence, the concept of intercultural communicative competence affords course designers a principled basis for making decisions about what to include in a curriculum. In fact, its components, and those of communicative competence, are in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001). The CEFR is a document that describes the performance and assessment standards for promoting plurilingualism as a goal of foreign and second language programmes across Europe. According to the report, plurilingualism ‘emphasizes the fact that an individual person’s experience of language in its cultural contexts expands from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to languages of other peoples (whether learnt at school or college, or by direct experience)’ (*ibid.*, p. 4).

6.2.5 Learning outcomes: Where are we going?

It is generally agreed that the goal of language learning from a sociocultural perspective is for learners to add alternative knowledge, skills and abilities for understanding and participating in a wide range of intellectual and practical activities to their already established repertoires of sense-making knowledge and abilities. This is to enable learners to broaden their communicative experiences, their worldviews, and their understandings of the active, creative roles they as responsible intercultural citizens play in constructing these worlds.

While the concepts of communicative competence and intercultural communicative competence have provided the field with useful frameworks with which to consider the various dimensions of knowledge, skills and abilities embodied in our sociocultural worlds, they are incomplete in that they leave open the question of whose sociocultural worlds learners are to be exposed to. A view of learning as socialisation into particular sociocultural worlds with sanctioned tools and signs for mediating participation in various communicative activities constitutive of these worlds implies a commitment, howsoever tacit, to some outcome. While the two concepts discussed above afford us a framework for understanding what *could* be involved, they do not address the issue of whose communicative worlds and, more specifically, whose sociocultural tools and whose ways of using the tools learners are to be socialised into. It has been suggested that learners' individual goals for learning languages be balanced with educational goals embodied in the learners' sociocultural worlds (cf. Hall, 2002; Widdowson, 2003, 2007). While on one level this suggestion seems practical, we are still left with having to decide on not only the specific worlds we wish to draw on for curricular content but also the norms by which learning outcomes are to be assessed. For example, let's say we decide that one of the goals of learning another language is to be able to use it in contexts considered significant to users of the target language. Given the variety of groups that speak the languages we typically teach in language classrooms, the cultural, linguistic and other differences that exist across these groups, and across social identities within language groups, we are still left with the question of *whose contexts*. For learners of English, for example, are the contexts those of groups from the United States? From Australia? From India? Likewise, for learners of Spanish, are the contexts we bring to the classroom those of groups from Spain? From Mexico? From the Dominican Republic? Do these contexts consist primarily of adults? Of adolescents? Are they typical of affluent communities? Of middle-class communities? Are these communities linguistically and culturally homogeneous or are they transnational, ethno-culturally and linguistically diverse communities?

Even if we cannot articulate the kinds of sociocultural contexts and their resources we would like to make part of the curricular content in our language classrooms, the textbooks and materials we use in our classrooms often do (cf. Cook, 1999; Wallace, 2006). A close inspection of them reveals that what we are making available to learners in terms of communicative options is at best incomplete. Perhaps, as Widdowson (1998) suggests, rather than attempt to bring unfamiliar worlds to the classroom, we should 'create a [classroom] community with its own cultural reality, with its own conventions of what is feasible and appropriate; conventions which are contrived, but which carry conviction' (p. 331). Putting aside the issue of *what* we decide to include in our curriculum, as research on learning shows

(National Research Council, 1999), such decisions need to be made. For having a clear understanding of what learners are to learn and being able to articulate the goals to learners provides them with a clear sense of where they are going and thus can help them to share in the responsibility for getting there.

Quote 6.4 On curricular considerations for language classrooms

What students need to have acquired at the end of their course, it seems to me, is a knowledge of the language which will provide them with a capability for further learning. This has essentially to be a knowledge of the possible. . . . This need not be, indeed cannot be comprehensive: the pedagogic task is to identify what features of the possible have the most potential for subsequent realization. In other words specifying objectives is a matter of investment in what seems likely to yield the best returns. . . . To think of objectives in terms of investment, rather than rehearsal, is to recognize that the end of a course of teaching does not by any means constitute the end of learning, but is only a stage in its development. The purpose of the course is to give momentum and direction, to establish vectors, so to speak, for subsequent learning, and thus to provide bearings whereby learners can make sense and learn from their own linguistic experience.

Widdowson (2003: 115)

6.3 Redesigning curriculum and instruction

Concerns with the need to define curricular content and learning outcomes notwithstanding, two general approaches to teaching language and culture from a sociocultural perspective have emerged in the field of applied linguistics. While their general goals are similar, they differ slightly in terms of the kinds of instructional environments they seek to create in their classrooms. The first approach, **critical pedagogy**, is more learner-centred in that it uses the worlds of the learners as the primary basis for designing curriculum and instructional activities with the goal to develop in learners the critical skills needed to explore their and others' beliefs and understandings of their worlds. A second approach combines a learner-centred focus with a knowledge-centred focus in that it seeks to design a learning environment that not only helps learners to understand and live within their own worlds, but is also concerned with helping students to acquire the knowledge, skills and abilities they need to expand their communicative horizons, and move into other worlds.

6.3.1 Critical pedagogy

Critical pedagogy (CP) is a general approach to language education that draws on the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1972, 1973). Freire developed an alternative model of education as a response to what he perceived to be shortcomings in the more traditional model. The more traditional model, he argued, is based on an understanding of learning as a process of transmitting or depositing neutral, value-free and universally applicable information into the empty heads of learners. For their part, learners are thought to be little more than passive and uncritical receptors of the deposited information. Their only role is to store the information for use at a later date. In such a view of pedagogy, Freire argued, social, cultural, political and historical concerns are kept invisible, the *status quo* is maintained, and learners continue to think they are powerless, unable to make a difference in their worlds.

In response to these shortcomings, Freire developed an approach in which the overall aim is to help learners to develop their own voices in response to their local conditions and circumstances, and in so doing, transform their lives in socially meaningful ways. Building on these insights, and keeping within a sociocultural perspective on learning, current formulations of CP consider learning to be a socially situated, collaborative process of transformation whereby teachers and students, together, build a common base of knowledge, frameworks of understanding and a shared system of meanings, values and beliefs for purposes of mutual growth.

While CP draws on similar concepts and ideas as other sociocultural approaches presented in earlier chapters, three features distinguish it from other methods. First, CP does not locate curricular issues and concerns in differences between learners' home and school cultures. Nor does it begin with a predetermined, content-based curriculum. Rather, it locates the focus of learning in a nexus of political, social, and economic conditions defining the communities within which learners live. This concern with learners' lives both in and out of the classroom is translated into a curriculum that is organised around experiences, needs and challenges that learners themselves have identified as central to their lives. Thus, it views teaching and learning as a 'dynamic process of constructing knowledge with learners, not as a set course to transmit a body of "hard" knowledge' (Byram and Feng, 2004: 158).

Also referred to as **participatory pedagogy**, CP aims to create environments in the classroom that assist learners in appropriating the knowledge and skills needed for full participation in their larger social worlds outside the classroom. Classroom activities are structured in such a way as to provide learners with opportunities to explore concerns and issues that are of utmost important to them, to raise their awareness of the social, cultural and political inequities manifested in their experiences, and to work to transform them by articulating their own directions for living. In addition to helping learners

to identify their concerns and transform them into curricular content, the role of the teacher is to ensure a safe environment in which learners feel comfortable and validated as they raise questions and consider alternatives.

A second distinguishing feature of CP is its focus on informed action as a central aim of learning. In other words, language learning is not considered to be about just developing a deeper understanding of one's lived experiences. It is also about knowing how to take action to make a difference in one's world. Thus, the tools and resources arising from their class discussions afford learners the means to engage in a 'language of critique' and a 'language of possibility'. In this way, language learning becomes not an end in itself but a tool for critical analysis and transformation of the social conditions limiting learners' full participation in their lives inside and outside school (cf. Kubota, 2004).

A final feature is its emphasis on developing mutual respect and trust, and shared norms for participating in their class discussions and other activities. By forming social bonds with the members of their classroom communities, learners build 'social capital', defined as networks of social relationships that can help foster the development of interpersonal, academic and career opportunities beyond the classroom and learners' own social groups (Alfred, 2010).

Problem-posing approach

One type of CP commonly found in many adult immigrant community-based language programmes is the **problem-posing approach**. This approach uses learners' experiences, and in particular, the problems or complex concerns or challenges they face in their communities outside the classroom as its curricular focus. Its aim is to help to make visible the social, political and cultural underpinnings of their learners' experiences, to raise learners' their awareness of these links, and to help them to acquire the specific communicative skills and knowledge necessary for engaging with the social forces restricting their lives and taking action in ways that they feel will be beneficial.

Learners' experiences are typically brought to the classroom using such media as pictures, comics, short stories, songs, and dramas to generate discussion centered on the problem depicted in the materials. Wallerstein (1983) points out that in order to represent these experiences adequately and meaningfully in the classroom, it is essential that teachers be intimately connected with the lives of their students outside of the classroom and have some shared understandings of these experiences and the realities the students face. It may also mean bringing the classroom to the learners, locating it in safe sites in their communities, rather than expecting learners to come to the classroom (cf. Auerbach, 2000).

To help to generate discussion, the teacher typically asks a series of open-ended questions about the situation depicted in the materials. The

aim of the questions is to encourage students to define the real-life problem, share their experiences and elaborate on what they see. The objective is not to generate a particular solution but to explore the complexities of the issue, and to identify actions that respond constructively to the issue. The particular communicative resources that form the content of class lessons evolve from these conversations and identified actions, and thus provide learners with personally meaningful purposes for their development. In integrating learning of communicative skills and knowledge with the particular social activities of reflection and analysis, they become appropriated by learners as new tools for implementing real change in their lives.

Concept 6.1 Basic components of a problem-posing approach

This approach consists of the following three components:

- 1 *Listening*: Through listening to and observing students in and out of class, the teacher defines and codifies student concerns for use in structured language learning and dialogue.
- 2 *Dialogue*: Using the codified concerns as springboards, the teacher and students engage in dialogue about the concerns or issues, and ways to view and respond to them.
- 3 *Action*: The discussions move students to use what they have learned to take action outside the classroom.

Wallerstein (1983)

Alternative forms of a problem-posing approach include **participatory action research** (e.g. Cammarota and Romero, 2009) and **critical performative pedagogy** (e.g. Louis, 2005). The first organises curricula around problems arising from students' social contexts including schools, neighbourhoods and workplaces, that in some way constrain their opportunities for self-determination. These problems become the focus of collaborative investigation into the identified problems to gather additional information that is then used by the learners to take action. The second is based on Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1995) and uses performance as a way for learners to imagine and explore alternative means for transforming the conditions of their lives. In its various instantiations, CP is considered to be at one and the same time, a 'pedagogy of reflection, a pedagogy of dissent, a pedagogy of dialogue, a pedagogy of empowerment, a pedagogy of action and a pedagogy of hope' (McLaren, 1995: 34).

It should be noted that not all learners embrace CP. Some prefer a seemingly more neutral approach, one that stays away from rather than embraces what some might consider to be controversial matters. Advocates point out that the aim of CP is not to lay out a particular agenda or point of view for learners to follow. Rather, it is to provide them with opportunities

to engage with critical issues, and to voice their concerns. Thus, if learners are resistant, teachers need to make official space for their resistances, for once students name their resistances they can become objects of collaborative reflection and dialogue (cf. Auerbach, 2000). In other words, the resistances themselves can become the basis for curricular development by affording learners the chance to talk about their needs and learning strategies and, more generally, to analyse social and pedagogical issues that are of great importance to them.

6.3.2 Project-based learning

Project-based learning (PBL) is an approach that is both learner- and knowledge-centred. It organises learning around extended tasks or projects that seek to address a challenging question or problem. In formal language programmes, projects are typically organised around a topic from an academic content area such as history, health, physical science and so on. In community and professional programmes, projects are organised around issues or problems identified as significant to the interested parties. Basic phases of PBL include selecting a topic or theme, deciding on the final product, planning and implementing procedures for completing it, and sharing the outcome, usually to a wider audience than just members of the learning group.

While much of the project work is done by learners, teachers play an important role in facilitating the process of gathering and processing information by providing them with the linguistic and other resources they need to complete project tasks, giving advice when needed, and helping learners to reflect on what they are learning as they complete the project. What distinguishes PBL from other project work is that PBL is the primary organiser of curriculum and instruction; the projects define both the curricular matter and the means by which it is accessed and learned. Project work, on the other hand, is inserted into instruction as one means to present or illustrate curricular topics or concepts.

According to Stoller (2006), students derive several benefits from their participation in PBL, including increased investment in the topic, improved skills for working in small groups, and increased autonomy and willingness to take responsibility for their own learning.

Quote 6.5 On the value of PBL

PBL is important not just as a different and more efficient way to afford language learning opportunities, but in a wider sense as a semiotic-ecological endeavor that focuses on the making and using of signs that are multisensory and multimodal.

van Lier (2006: xiv)

Pragmatic ethnography

A type of project-based learning that has found its way into language programmes concerned with developing intercultural communicative competence is ‘**pragmatic ethnography**’ (Damen, 1987: 63). With theoretical roots in linguistic anthropology, ethnography is a research method used to provide rich, detailed descriptions of the sociocultural patterns and practices of cultural groups (cf. [Chapters 1](#) and [8](#)). Pragmatic ethnography differs from ethnography used as a research method in that it is undertaken for ‘personal and practical purposes and not to provide scientific data and theory’ (*ibid.*: 63). Conducting a pragmatic ethnography entails having learners gather information on the group of interest through observations of and participation in the group’s communicative practices, interviews with members of the group, collection of pertinent documents related to the group and the practices, and so on. The gathered data form the basis for learner reflections and enhanced understandings not only of the cultural practices of the group under study but of the cultural dimensions of their own practices.

Quote 6.6 On the pedagogical value of ethnography

Of all forms of scientific knowledge, ethnography is the most open, the most compatible with a democratic way of life, the least likely to produce a world in which experts control knowledge at the expense of those who are studied. The skills of ethnography are enhancements of skills all normal persons employ in everyday life. . . . It [ethnography] mediates between what members of a given community know and do, and accumulates comparative understanding of what members of communities generally have known and done.

Hymes (1981: 57)

While such an approach works well for learners living in the same community as members of the cultural group being studied, with the wide availability of the internet and electronic communication tools that allow for social networking activities such as e-mailing, blogging, and video conferencing, it can also be used effectively in contexts where face-to-face contact is unlikely or impossible. This is illustrated by *Cultura*, a programme started by a team of faculty in the Foreign Languages and Literatures Section of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the late 1990s (Furstenberg, 2010). In this programme, groups of English language speakers who are studying another language at MIT team up via electronic communication media with a group of target language speakers who are also English language learners for an ‘intercultural journey’ (*ibid.*: 330). They share a website and, via online discussion forums, they collaboratively

analyse and compare perspectives on a variety of digital textual and visual materials from their respective cultures. As Furstenberg notes, the use of electronic technology is essential to the success of the programme in that it makes possible learner engagement with ‘a multiplicity of viewpoints and a real insider’s view of the other culture that were simply unattainable prior to this’ (p. 331).

Concept 6.2 Key steps in conducting a pragmatic ethnography

- 1 Collect data intensively and extensively.
- 2 Organise data systematically.
- 3 Be reflexive about the data, regularly questioning how it was produced and your initial assumptions.
- 4 Be steeped in the data, constantly rereading and searching for further illumination.
- 5 Be accountable to the data, making sure that all claims are grounded in the data.
- 6 Look for patterns but keep a look out for contradictory evidence.
- 7 Go for a story line or central theme that draws your ethnography together.

Roberts *et al.* (2001: 149)

6.3.3 The multiliteracies project

Another innovative approach that is both learner- and knowledge-centred is the **multiliteracies project** (New London Group, 1996, 2000). The project was developed by a group of international scholars in response to what they had identified as two important challenges to education. The first is the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity of communities around the world which, they argue, has changed the nature of schooling. Students are now required to learn

to negotiate regional, ethnic, or class-based dialects; cultural discourses; the code switching often to be found within a text among different languages, dialects, or registers; different visual and iconic meanings; and variation in the gestural relationships among people, language, and material objects.

(New London Group, 2000: 14)

The second challenge they identified is the proliferation of means for communicating within and across these communities. Not only have additional communication technologies been created, but communicating through them is ‘increasingly multimodal – in which written-linguistic modes of meaning are part and parcel of visual, audio, and spatial patterns of meaning’ (Cope and Kalantis, 2000: 5). Pedagogies based on one formal,

standard notion of language and on a mono-modal, mono-cultural literacy are inadequate for meeting these challenges. What is required, the New London Group argued, is a pedagogy that seeks to ‘recruit . . . the different subjectivities, interests, intentions, commitments and purposes that students bring to learning’ (New London Group, 2000: 18), rather than trying to remove or ignore them. Such a pedagogy needs to open doors to new communicative practices and resources that expand students’ options for participating in their worlds, and enable them to draw on multiple meaning-making modes to bring their cultural worlds into existence, maintain them and transform them for their own purposes.

To meet these challenges, the New London Group proposed a **pedagogy of multiliteracies**, consisting of four interrelated spheres of learning opportunities. **Situated practice** learning opportunities socialise learners into those communicative activities in which they are expected to become competent. The assumption embodied in situated practice is that mastery of skills and knowledge needed for competent performance is partially dependent on learner involvement in the very activities in which they wish to become competent from the beginning of instruction. **Overt instruction** opportunities provide learners with explicit instruction on the various resources used to make meaning. **Critical framing** opportunities engage learners in the critical analysis of their activities and the resources used in their design so that they can identify the diverse and multiple perspectives embodied in them, and ultimately make informed choices about their participation in their social worlds. The knowledge and skills developed in these learning opportunities form the base of **transformed practice**, where learners are provided with opportunities to take the lead in their own learning. They use their new understandings, knowledge and skills to try out different voices in familiar contexts, to invent new means and, where possible, create new contexts and new goals for self-expression and connecting with others.

The four dimensions of learning opportunities in a multiliteracies pedagogy are not considered to be rigid, hierarchical stages of learning. Rather, they are complexly interrelated, ‘elements of each [which] may occur simultaneously, while at different times one or the other will predominate, and all of them are repeatedly revisited at different levels’ (New London Group, 2000: 85). Together, the conditions for learning fostered across the four dimensions aim to promote learners’ development of a complex range of understandings and perspectives, knowledge and skills, and values and motivations needed for full personal, social and cultural participation in their classroom communities as well as in their larger, social communities.

Underlying the dimensions of learning in a multiliteracies pedagogy is the concept of **design**, which is offered as an alternative to competence. As Kress (2010: 4) notes, competence suggests ‘social regulation’ whereas design focuses on learners’ present actions in terms of their future outcomes.

Design is thus forward-looking, ‘a means of projecting an individual’s interest into their world with the intent of effect in the future’ (*ibid.*: 23).

Quote 6.7 Designs of meaning in a multiliteracies pedagogy

The starting point for the Multiliteracies framework is the notion that knowledge and meaning are historically and socially located and produced, that they are ‘designed’ artefacts. But more than artefacts, Design is a dynamic process, a process of subjective self-interest and transformation, consisting of

- *the Designed*: the available meaning-making resources and patterns and conventions of meaning in a particular cultural context;
- *Designing*: the process of shaping emergent meaning, which involves representation and recontextualisation;
- *the Redesigned*: the outcome of designing, something through which the meaning-maker has remade themselves and created a new meaning-making resource.

Kalantis and Cope (2008: 203–204)

According to the New London Group, to support a pedagogy of multiliteracies what is needed is an educationally accessible functional grammar, that is, a metalanguage whose purpose is ‘to identify and explain differences between texts, and relate these to the contexts of culture and situation in which they seem to work’ (New London Group, 2000: 24). To be useful, a metalanguage should address the following five questions (Kalantis and Cope, 2008: 205):

- 1 Representational – What do the meanings refer to?
- 2 Social – How do the meanings connect the persons they involve?
- 3 Organisational – How do the meanings hang together?
- 4 Contextual – How do the meanings fit into the larger world of meaning?
- 5 Ideological – Whose interests are the meanings skewed to serve?

Genre-based pedagogy

One metalanguage that has been useful to multiliteracies education is Halliday’s systemic functional linguistics (SFL) (cf. [Chapters 1](#) and [3](#)). SFL considers grammar to be an open-set of resources, the meanings of which are motivated by the functions they serve. James Martin and his colleagues (e.g. Christie, 2008; Christie and Martin, 2007; Martin, 2006, 2009) have applied SFL to the development of the concept of genre, defined as ‘a socially sanctioned means of constructing and negotiating meanings’ (Christie,

2008: 29) and to the development of a genre-based pedagogy for reading and writing. In this approach, findings from an SFL analysis of the texts that students are expected to read and write are the foundation of the curriculum. Advocates of this approach point out that its pedagogical power comes from the fact in that it offers a systematic means of describing texts and the ways language is used to make meaning and thus offers clear, explicit directions to teachers and learners about what is to be learned.

The approach has also been usefully incorporated into professional development programmes for teachers to enable them 'to analyze texts, think about language at new levels of abstraction, and develop new understanding of the complex meaning-making practices of their subject matter and their pedagogical approaches' (Achugar *et al.*, 2007: 21). In fact, a study (*ibid.*) examining the use of the genre-based approach in three different teacher development contexts revealed that it provided teachers working with English language learners powerful instructional tools for helping learners expand their understandings and use of their bilingual resources.

Quote 6.8 Principles of genre-based pedagogy

Writing is a social activity

Communication always has a purpose, a context, and an intended audience, and these aspects can form the basis of both writing tasks and syllabuses. This means that students need to engage in a variety of relevant writing experiences which draw on, analyse, and investigate different purposes and readers.

Learning to write is needs-oriented

Effective teaching recognises the wants, prior learning, and current proficiencies of students, but in a genre-based course, it also means, as far as possible, identifying the kinds of writing that learners will need to do in their target situations and incorporating these into the course.

Learning to write requires explicit outcomes and expectations

Learning occurs more effectively if teachers are explicit about what is being studied, why it is being studied, and what will be expected of students at the end of the course, representing what Bernstein (1990, p. 73) calls a 'visible pedagogy'.

Learning to write is a social activity

Learning to write is supported within familiar routines, or cycles of activity, and by linking new contexts and understandings to what students already know about writing. Teaching is, therefore, always a series of scaffolded developmental steps in which teachers and peers play a major role.

Learning to write involves learning to use language

Genre teaching involves being explicit about how texts are grammatically patterned, but grammar is integrated into the exploration of texts and contexts rather than taught as a discrete component. This helps learners not only to see how grammar and vocabulary choices create meanings, but to understand how language itself works, acquiring a way to talk about language and its role in texts.

Hyland (2007: 152–153)

While genre-based approaches have focused primarily on the meaning-making functions of language structures, the development of metalanguages for other semiotic resources has been a growing concern for those with interests in multiliteracies pedagogy. A key contribution of SFL to this work is its metafunctional principle, which states,

semiotic resources simultaneously provide the tools for constructing ideational meaning (i.e. experiential meaning and logical relations) and for enacting social relations (i.e. interpersonal meaning). These metafunctions are enabled through the organization of the discourse, which is the textual metafunction of semiosis.

(O'Halloran, 2008: 444)

The principle provides a theoretical framework for analysing the functions and interactions of semiotic resources in the performance of particular social goals in multimodal discourses. For example, scholars such as Gunther Kress and his colleagues (Kress, 2003; Kress *et al.*, 2005; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006; Bezemer and Kress, 2008) and Unsworth (2006) have drawn on this principle to create new metalanguages for visual designs and multimodal texts, which are texts that integrate visual, audio and technological modes of meaning into their designs. Such work affords the continued development of models and strategies for implementing multiliteracies pedagogy in ways that respond to the challenges created by ever-emerging electronic modes of communication and the increasingly diverse populations of classrooms and sites of learning.

6.4 Summary

In learning contexts concerned with teaching language and culture from a sociocultural perspective, the general instructional aim is not to teach language and culture *per se*, as subject matter removed from any specific contexts of activity. Rather it is to help learners to understand the linguistic

and other means by which their activities are constructed and the cultural meanings that are embodied in their uses. It is also to help them to understand the roles and identities they are appropriated into by their use of particular resources, the social, cultural and other forces that give shape to these constructions, and how to negotiate with others to position themselves in relation to these roles and identities, and larger social forces in ways that are mutually beneficial.

While there is general agreement with these goals among practitioners operating within a sociocultural perspective, there is still the question of how we define where we are going in terms of development. Even as we acknowledge the importance of expanding learners' worlds, and the usefulness of ethnographies of communication and studies on multiliteracies for illuminating the multiple modes and their affordances for designing meaning, we still know little about the communicative activities of the many linguistically and culturally diverse groups that comprise our worlds. We do know however, that the impact of electronic technologies on the activities they engage in and the resources they draw on to make meaning is huge. For example, they are, on a daily basis, exposed to if not fully participating in video and online games, hypertext and hypermedia narratives and online chat room discussions. As Unsworth (2008) notes, the literacies entailed in such activities 'are multiple, involving not only the comprehension and composition of images and text, separately and in combination, and in paper as well as digital media, but also navigation through cyberspace to locate relevant sites, manipulation of electronic textual material and evaluation of information' (p. 62).

Moreover, not only are means for communicating increasingly multimodal, the modes themselves are increasingly more permeable and hybrid (cf. Canagarajah, 2003). Because the activities that are made available to our students in language classrooms and other contexts fundamentally shape both the direction and substance of learners' knowledge, the choices we make about the kinds of communicative activities to include in the curriculum are highly consequential. Therefore, even having some knowledge about these worlds leaves us with the value-laden decision of whose worlds we are to orient to in our classrooms.

Assuming that we are able to make such decisions, we still know little about the pedagogical effectiveness of the practices described in this chapter for expanding learners' communicative horizons. Arguing that they should be effective, as the approaches discussed in this chapter do, is certainly not the same as documenting not only that they are effective but how they manage to be so as well. There has been some budding attention to this concern, at least with multiliteracies pedagogy, with findings from recent studies providing evidence on the efficacy of using the meta-language of SFL in literacy development (e.g. Quinn, 2004; Schleppegrell *et al.*, 2004). We also have some evidence on the successful application of

a multiliteracies pedagogy in disadvantaged schools (e.g. Newfield and Maungedzo, 2006). Such research efforts need to be expanded to include other approaches and other contexts, and work to tease apart the complex links between teaching and learning practices and the developmental consequences arising from learners' varied trajectories of participation in them. With continued attention to these concerns, we might find that the specific curricular choices we make about the kinds of communicative practices to include in the classroom and the instructional practices we use to socialise students into them are consequential to learners' development in ways we may not have imagined.

Further reading

- Berlin, L. (2005) *Contextualizing College ESL Classroom Praxis: A Participatory Approach to Effective Instruction*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. The author describes in detail an approach to adult ESL instruction that is based on Freire's principles of effective pedagogy. Examples of classroom practices are provided from an ethnographic study undertaken by the author in an intensive English programme.
- Byrnes, H. (ed.) (2007) *Advanced Language Learning: The Contribution of Halliday and Vygotsky*, London: Continuum. The chapters in this edited volume examine new approaches to the teaching of advanced levels of language ability. Integrating the insights of Halliday, Vygotsky and Bakhtin with empirical data from language classroom, the chapters explore theoretical, descriptive and instructional aspects of advanced language classrooms.
- Martin, J. R. and Rose, D. (2008) *Genre Relations: Mapping Culture*, London: Equinox. This book offers an introduction to genre analysis from the perspective of the Halliday-inspired 'Sydney School' of functional linguistics. Included is an introduction to the study of genre, discussions of five major families of genres (stories, histories, reports, explanations and procedures), and a conclusion in which they discuss several issues on genre analysis arising from their model.
- Risager, K. (2007) *Language and Culture Pedagogy: From a National to a Transnational Paradigm*, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters. The text offers a view of language and culture teaching that recognises the increasing diversity of communities around the world. It includes a historical overview of language and culture teaching in foreign language education programmes, and proposes a transnational framework for language and culture pedagogy whose goal is to develop intercultural citizens of the world.
- Stein, P. (2008) *Multimodal Pedagogies in Diverse Classrooms*, London: Routledge. The text examines how social justice and democratic practices can be promoted in diverse classrooms. Using examples drawn from her research undertaken in post-apartheid South Africa, the author draws on a social semiotic perspective of communication to examine the myriad forms of representations such as image, space and movement, through which learners create meaning in classrooms and how these differences can be used to promote a dynamic and productive site for learning.

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