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Book review

Learning the Arts of Linguistic Survival: Languaging, Tourism, Life

Alison Phipps (2007). Clevedon: Channel View Publications, 205 pp., £19.95 (paperback), ISBN 1-84541-053-X

The number of people learning languages for tourist reasons in the West is a most significant one and yet literature has ignored this student group, focusing instead on language learning either in a functionalist manner or at an academic level. Moreover, neither literature on linguistics nor on tourism has addressed how aspects of their fields are linked to social relationships. The above gap is being filled by the latest book of Alison Phipps, whose main purpose is to address the relationship between tourism and languages through exploring tourist language learning.

Phipps brings a fresh look at language learning and language interaction through tourism by encouraging us to pay attention to what she defines as the 'quick' of human relationship, that is 'anything characterised by the presence of life'. Tourist language learners or 'languagers' – as Phipps has termed people who interact with the world through putting a language they are learning into action – step outside their habitual ways of speaking, letting go of their linguistic power. To do that signifies an important social phenomenon and it is the aim of this book to explore why people bother to invest time and energy in learning to speak a tourist language and what happens when people attempt to shift their language norms, not as a necessity, but as part of their tourist experience.

The distinctiveness of this book is that it emphasises the everydayness of human action and human relationships, overcoming the separation between traditional liberal education and practical knowledge, between mind and body and between the act of learning and the act of using the acquired knowledge. Most importantly for educationalists and linguists, it challenges the established hierarchies of what counts as worthwhile learning/teaching by showing how apparently simple linguistic abilities and practices, like ordering a coffee in another language, are more than functional competencies. They can be practices through which our perception of the Other and ourselves are transformed.

Phipps, coming from a humanist approach and drawing on a wide range of disciplines – such as anthropology, postcolonial theory, linguistics and cultural studies – perceives language learning as a way of dwelling in another world. She, thus, redirects our attention to small level – and yet very common, significant and so far ignored – interaction with one another and with the Other. This book looks at different aspects of a tourist language class, such as practising oral speech or using games, but instead of focusing on the linguistic elements of these practices, it explores their social and psychological implications. In other words, Phipps

does not seek to establish a language teaching framework, but to enter the social world of the learning experience.

For this reason, the author does not write as a pedagogue, but as a tourist language learner. This is linked to the methodology of the study undertaken and it is reflected in the writing style of the book. Taking a phenomenological perspective, she engages in an empirical ethnographic study of tourist language classrooms through acting herself as participant observer in a variety of courses. She uses a reflective journal with field notes in the form of language learning notes or reactions to the educational experience. These narratives and images are inserted into the text, giving life to the book. In this manner, not only is the book written from a tourist language learner's point of view, but it is also read in this way. Readers are, therefore, rethinking the experience of learning a language and putting it into action, which is immensely important for a language educationalist.

Although links can be made, the book does not repeat what would apply to any language class. Language learning for tourism entails a quest for recreation and for a time that differs from habituated daily action. The learning involves touristic imaginings as memories or hopes for future encounters. Accordingly, learners bring with them in the class different needs, aims and yearnings. Imagining and enjoying comes together with struggling as part of the educational experience. Pleasure is accompanied by dealing with risk and transforming oneself when putting the acquired language skills in practice. The above feelings are explored in the book in the seeking to answer the question 'why bother' to learn a language for tourist purposes when the gains appear so futile and temporary.

Through examining lessons on way finding and pronunciation and by looking into language learning activities, such as games and oral practice, Phipps illustrates the uniqueness of tourist language learning curriculum and classroom interaction. As the reader becomes absorbed in this world, it is revealed how language classes, which remain in the margin of the educational system, encourage a heightened awareness of place and environment. They develop the ability to transform a travel destination into an inhabited place and enable learners to make meaning and relate to the unfamiliar. Phipps contends that learning to converse in the destination's language represents a charitable act of stepping out of one's own comfort zone.

This act is non-comprehensible and unnoticed by the functionalist approach that dominates language learning policies and literature. And yet this oversight allows tourist language classes to develop in a different manner involving a sense of play – although a play where the stakes can be too high – both in the classroom and when the learned language is put into action. In this way, the class acts as a rehearsal for being a tourist. It gives a feel for using the language and enables play and social bonding to flourish both in the classroom and in the tourist destination. Accordingly, Phipps argues that, against the prevailing insulation of the West, this ignored student group, by breaking with the dominant tongue and its perceived power, shows a willingness to open up themselves in ways that impact on their self-perception and relating to the world. Unwittingly political, switching from English is a courtesy that attempts to add to simple interaction a sense of social relatedness and commitment.

In conclusion, this is a very engaging and stimulating book, full of dense meaning and not for someone who wants an easy read. It generates an excitement as so many new ideas are explored in a way that the reader can refer to personally – as a language educationalist, as a language learner and even as a tourist. Most important of all, this book exerts a feeling of hopefulness in a time where functionalism on the one hand and postmodernism on the

other have denied us such feelings. This is an optimism that derives from people who are not content to operate according to the dominant modes suggested by tourism, but who choose to dwell in different worlds and engage in vertical travel through which relationships with places, people and life are deepened. It is to these people and this phenomenon that this book draws our attention to. Through exploring tourist language learning, Alison Phipps manages to reshape our worldview too.

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