

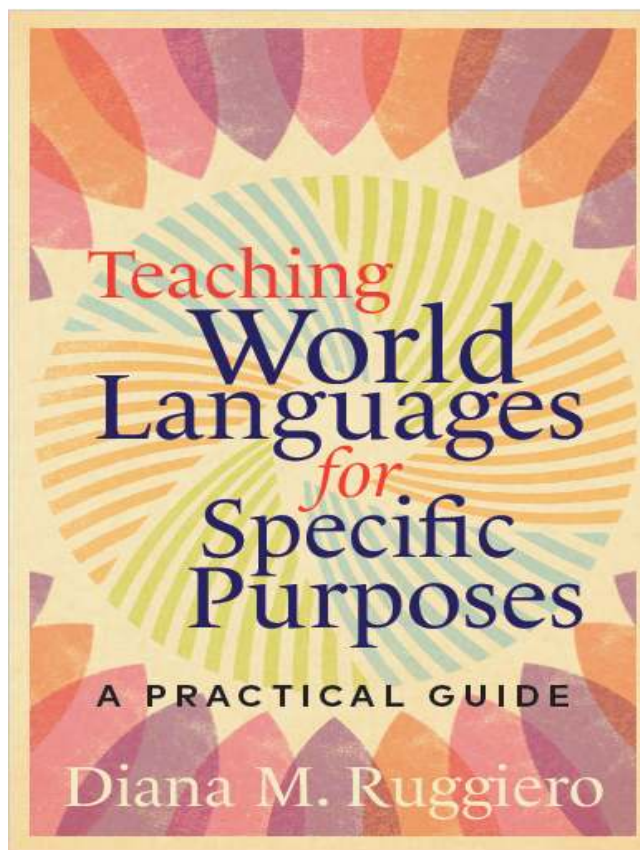
BOOK REVIEW

RUGGIERO'S SENSIBLE APPROACH ON 'TEACHING WORLD LANGUAGES FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES'

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Teaching World Languages for Specific Purposes. A practical guide

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A genuinely fresh (March 2022) release of Georgetown University Press, Washington, DC, the volume entitled *Teaching World Languages for Specific Purposes* is a reinvigorated approach on the subject matter, presenting Diana Ruggiero's perspective and experience, as an academic teaching Spanish and as a researcher in the fields of world languages for specific purposes (WLSP) and community service learning (CSL).

The volume follows a quite classic structure. It begins with a four page preface and a two page acknowledgments section. Then the main contents develop along 110

pages, divided into 2 large sections: 11 book chapters (in 74 pages) and 10 appendixes. The end is dedicated to six pages of references, a two page section about the author and a three page index.

As for the thematic contents of the chapters, three large spheres can be identified. First, after preliminary informative aspects concerning the contexts of WLSP and their general approach in higher education, resources for learners and instructors are completing the initial topic area that covers the first three chapters. Then, the middle topic area, considered along the following three chapters, brings about curricula, course, community partnership and CLS projects designs. The rest of the chapters put forward models and strategies of integrating WLSP in other courses, interpreting in WLSP, incorporating culture, meeting needs of heritage language learners, and employing communication technology to link education with community during the current pandemic.

Within the Appendixes we are provided with samples of resources, lesson plans, syllabus, assignments for intermediate/ advanced levels.

Diana Ruggiero prefaces her book by a concise though thorough presentation of the contents, providing a very precise summary of the chapters and rendering a clear description of what the book comprises.

Hence, this book review is not going to undertake the regular task of briefly presenting each chapter, which would come as a superfluous, redundant action, once all this information is already available in the preface of the volume, on pp. xi-xii. Instead, the current presentation aims at putting forward the distinguished approach of the author, which transpires both from her discourse and from her examples of practice. Consequently, our review will be, in its turn, quite personal and subjective.

An empathetic observer, Diana Ruggiero is as well, by nature of her profession, an 'actor', an active performer in the endeavour of moulding, shaping, refining human characters and minds, a trainer, an instructor, a true 'life-coach', as she is teaching, at higher education level, not just a foreign language, but, we may say, quite a life style, of cultural understanding, sense of community, human connection and compassion:

"My student-centered approach to education led me to develop a teaching and research agenda that focused largely on languages, cultures, and communities, with an eye toward developing student intercultural sensitivity and competence. To this end, I integrated culture and community service learning into my teaching of WLSP and focused on empowering my students to find their purpose in learning and using language as a vehicle for social change." (p.x)

The unusual warmth and empathic nature of the person who is writing are perceived from between the lines. A sensitive, emotion charged communication can be sensed while reading. A sincere disclosure and closeness can be witnessed along the pages, throughout the book, starting from the words she addresses her readers within the preface, throughout the chapters, to the models and practical examples given in the appendixes. All these are perceived so clearly by the readers and are felt so natural and obvious once we are introduced to the authors'

first steps on the road of enlightening the minds and spirits of the young:

"I began teaching Spanish as a way to share with students my cultural heritage, background, and experiences as an Argentine and Latin woman living in the United States, as well as my love of language learning and the diverse cultures of the Spanish-speaking world." (p.x)

to then find about the further developments in her own formation and education, towards designing of such curricula that

"spoke to my strengths as a teacher and that reflected my background, interests, and values as a scholar and socially conscious individual." (p.x)

Far from the rather cold, distant and over-theoretical style that the academic world and the world of research have come to gradually favour, adopt and extensively consider as the 'right' one in professional communication and academic writing, this sensible, still objective, and yet very warm and 'humane' approach is like a breeze of fresh air in the rarefied atmosphere of the strict, methodological, formal discourses.

As the author reveals in the Preface, a shift of objectives, with a "curriculum development that goes beyond cookie-cutter lesson plans and activities" (p.xi), is indeed necessary in the teaching of languages, and hence her intuitively elaborated and followed strategy:

"moving away from a concern with lexicon to a desire to foster and facilitate effective communication within specific contexts. As a result, cultural knowledge, intercultural sensitivity and competence, intercultural communication, and community engagement are now at the center of world language higher education." (p.x)

Ultimately, the traditional style - oftentimes too official and methodical - can indeed even get to intoxicate our profound values, harming the human core. Thus, such a novel, refreshing way of communicating and presenting ideas and facts, of teaching and transmitting information and knowledge, this distinct manner of comprehending feelings and the affectionate means of addressing, proving a deep understanding of the human character and emotions, are more than necessary in this respect and gratefully welcomed.

Pursuing her declared purpose, that of creating a better world for and through her students (p.x), Diana Ruggiero puts forward her book - with its concrete materials, resources, samples, models or assignments, with all the information, developments and strategies presented, as well as, incidentally, through her friendly way of introducing them all, due to her closeness in communication style -

"in service to the formation of empathic, compassionate, and mindful students and future leaders in the professions and the community. Such a socially conscious perspective in the teaching of WLSP and world language education is not only timely and relevant as an educational trend in helping our students succeed professionally, but a necessity for making our world a better place for all." (p.xi)

The end words of the preface strengthen the impression that this book comes like a heritage, a gift to all stakeholders:

"The appendix materials are likewise meant to be heuristic and therefore applicable across any language area. Teachers are encouraged to use them as a basis for developing their own curriculum materials. It is my hope that teachers, regardless of their background, find and contribute their own respective voice and strengths as a world language educator to the teaching of WLSP."
(p.xii)

Addressing the readers directly, as if engages in a cozy discussion with them, the author keeps a tone of closeness along the book, friendly advising us, the language teachers reading her book, to put into practice all our expertise and background, to bring all our knowledge into the class and proudly express ourselves fully, as this is the true way learners can benefit from rich, complete and unique experiences:

"Regardless of disciplinary background and training, you bring a unique perspective that will inevitably inform your lesson or class in WLSP in a distinct way. Leverage this as a resource because this is your personal stamp that will differentiate your WLSP course and lesson plan from that of any other teacher at any other institution. [...] As individuals and teachers, we possess different strengths.[...] though we should certainly strive to develop and hone all aspects of our craft, we can nonetheless recognize and honor our respective strengths. [...] your specific personal and educational background can be leveraged in the preparation of your WLSP course." (p.15)

So as the language instructors can understand the needs and challenges of the community and be able to offer appropriate training, to develop partnerships, useful curricula and language teaching projects, to improve the approach in teaching the language, the author's advice, coming as no surprise, is to strengthen connections with locals:

"Being present in the community can take many forms, but getting to know people is the most important thing you can do. Volunteering your time and energy and joining directorship boards is one way to achieve this end, but it can and should go beyond this. Visit local businesses, organizations, and institutions, go to local events, and get to know your neighbors. Talk to people..." (p.31)

It is common sense and indeed well remarked by the author that instructors in the field of languages, especially for specific purposes, have to consider the cultural and community background, be well prepared in intercultural understanding and communication. Language teachers hence need to be able to make allowance for and include in their courses the - somehow collateral in this respect but nevertheless essential - aspects encountered in the real life situations that define particular environments. These refer to the backgrounds of their learners or, more likely, of the people that the beneficiaries of the language instruction will come into contact with, by nature of their jobs:

"We must consider, in addition to grammar and theory, extralingual aspects informing meaning production in verbal and written transactions in any given specific context, including culture and

nonverbal communication. [...] we must consider intentions. Whom does the service provider, organization, business provider, and so forth desire to serve, and what are the cultural dynamics and factors that need to be considered on the part of the interpreter as a result? The teaching of interpreting in WLSP, therefore, is as much about cultural sensitivity and competence as it is about context-specific knowledge and vocabulary." (p.50)

Before presenting several metacognitive activities and exercises that can be well used in order to enlarge views and optimize familiarization with and learning of diverse aspects of cultural differences, Diana Ruggiero notes the real challenge of insufficient knowledge and preparation of both categories involved (teachers and learners as well) when it comes to specificities of intercultural approaches.

"One of the challenges in integrating culture in any introductory language classroom is the matter of expertise and lack of cultural knowledge on the part of teachers and students alike. Just as in the fear of approaching WLSP for lack of professional background experience and knowledge, the reluctance to engage matters of culture, including social and historical issues of relevance, is often the result of a perceived lack of cultural knowledge and sensitivity. Teachers may tend to homogenize cultural differences within a language area while outsourcing the culture component of classroom instruction to course materials such as textbooks and audiovisuals. Likewise, students might choose not to engage in discussion for fear of being wrong or singled out for being ignorant at best or insensitive at worst. One of the main ways in which this tendency can be mitigated is through open and transparent dialogue about the limits of knowledge and the nature of the learning process." (p.59)

The author identifies here, as also seen in the above quotation, a similar problem to that occurring in the case of teaching a language for specific purposes, where the professional expertise in the given domain is most often missing - the language teachers not being experts in every field, obviously - and, hence, it becomes problematic to properly apprehend, cover and interpret all elements and data that can be met in the various authentic texts which may come into discussion at certain points along the courses. That is indeed another matter much considered in the literature on LSP.

It is some of the author's words, again, that would be best employed for a conclusion. Towards the end of the chapters section, Diana Ruggiero overviews how her volume provides stable premises and useful points of departure for development and integration of WLSP into curricula worldwide - in a common endeavour to promote *WLSP for a Changed World* -, and she then simply and most accurately advocates that:

"In light of recent history, it is overdue for world language programs and institutions of higher education to reorient their priorities, values, and purpose. WLSP must be brought from the margins to the center of world language education alongside linguistics and literature and cultural studies." (pp.73-74)

With a delicate and yet persuasive manner of approaching all aspects, from topics and discussions, material and resources, to collocutors, learners or colleagues, officials and ultimately readers of the book here discussed, Diana Ruggiero's gentle and still profoundly resonant voice cannot but only make itself heard and followed, which is just for the benefit of everything and everybody involved.