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Empowering the Foreign Language Learner Through Critical Literacies Development

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Abstract: This article examines current pedagogical trends in the foreign language classroom and argues that a critical literacies pedagogical approach (Freire, 1970) should guide instruction. A critical literacies pedagogical approach is then discussed in the context of foreign language teaching and learning, and particular attention in this article is given to the approach's potential to deemphasize the dominance of the native speaker (Cook, 1999; Kramsch, 1997; Maxim, 2006). Theory and findings from research in a variety of disciplines (e.g., linguistics, English as a Lingua Franca, second language acquisition, education) is synthesized to posit that, through the use of a critical literacies pedagogical approach, learners will be empowered to overcome the impression that their non-native status puts them at an eternal disadvantage. The article concludes with some practical suggestions for the foreign language classroom and a discussion of broader implications that might affect not only the individual foreign language student but also the collective foreign language department at the university level.

Keywords: critical literacies, foreign language, empowerment, pedagogical theory

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"There is a voice inside of you
That whispers all day long,
'I feel that this is right for me,
I know that this is wrong.'
No teacher, preacher, parent, friend
Or wise man can decide
What's right for you—just listen to
The voice that speaks inside."
- Shel Silverstein, *Falling Up*

Introduction[1]

Foreign language curricula across the nation have been known to prioritize equipping students with certain communicative skills before challenging them to consider (multi)cultural phenomena and textual content. This kind of approach, known as communicative language teaching (CLT), dominated instruction in foreign language (FL) classrooms across the United States beginning in the 1980s and lasting into the new millennium. The approach's primary objective is to help students develop communicative competence, a construct theorized by linguist Dell Hymes in the mid-1960s. In theory, communicative competence is the ability to make appropriate linguistic choices for specific social contexts. As Canale and Swain (1980) later outlined, a student who demonstrates communicative competence can be accurate (grammatical competence), appropriate (sociolinguistic competence), strategic (strategic competence), and coherent (discourse competence). Research conducted at the turn of the 21st century

(e.g., Omaggio Hadley, 2001; Shrum & Glisan, 2005) suggested that CLT exposes students to authentic classroom instruction that formally integrates culture and language, thereby giving students the opportunity to express themselves creatively in a variety of contexts.

Communicative competence was a welcome change from earlier form-focused approaches to FL teaching and has been widely accepted among FL practitioners. However, researchers in the past several years have begun to question this learning model (e.g., Byrnes, 2006; Kramsch, 2006; Swaffar, 2006) and approaches have been theorized and designed to foster literacy development among FL learners (e.g., Allen, Paesani, & Dupuy, 2015; GUGD, 2011; Kern, 2000; Swaffar & Arens, 2005). While literacy-oriented theories and approaches are definitely a move in the right direction to resolve some caveats of CLT, they typically do not address a lingering problem with FL instruction, which is the idea of the "native speaker" (Cook, 1999; Kramsch, 1997; Maxim, 2006) with a "well-defined culture" (Kramsch, 2006, 2009; Banks, 1991).

The English as a Lingua Franca paradigm (ELF) has challenged and consequently deviated from the use of native speaker norms to teach English, but these standards are still quite commonplace in the context of teaching modern foreign languages in North American institutions. According to Jenkins (2006), most second language acquisition (SLA) research still focuses on investigating and understanding grammatical differences between native and non-

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[1] I acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that I can use when referring to individuals in my writing. Throughout this article, every effort has been made to prevent assumptions about the ways that individuals identify or refer to themselves. Although this article does not report data, I use the gender-neutral pronoun "they" when making hypotheses about students in general and the pronoun "one" when articulating thoughts about a single student.

Furthermore, the expression "he or she" has been replaced with the pronoun "they" (and the corresponding plural noun that is linguistically appropriate) in order to recognize the non-binary nature of gender identity. When referring to already established authors in the field I do use the traditional pronouns "she" or "he" (depending on the pronoun they have used in previous works).

native speakers, and pedagogical approaches are posited so that these grammatical differences can be avoided and so that learners proceed along a continuum towards native speaker competence. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Proficiency Guidelines (Swender, Conrad, & Vicars, 2012), a 24-page document that summarizes the possible proficiency levels for students studying a FL in the U.S., reference "the native interlocutor" (p. 5) or "natives" (p. 12) as the judges of linguistic competence in speech and writing. Furthermore, the highest level of proficiency in speaking, the Distinguished level, is characterized by language use that is "culturally authentic" (p. 4). In a familiar context, "near-native" is the term that is often used to label speakers at the highest levels of proficiency.

In light of global movements to embrace multiculturalism, this article will reexamine why the idea of the native speaker is problematic. In particular, it undermines realities about linguistic diversity within languages. It also ignores the complex identities and cultural values which commonly differ from person to person that are expressed through language. The native speaker is therefore an imaginary archetype that does not – simply because it cannot – represent all of the nuances that constitute a language and a culture. By giving students the impression that they must assimilate to the elusive native speaker, the teaching of foreign languages, under the guise that it supports linguistic and cultural diversity, "ironically promotes monolingualism, monoculturalism, normatism, and elitism" (Kubota, 2010, p. 99). While this problem can manifest at any stage of language learning and regardless of a student's age, this article will add to the already active discussion about the

native speaker and discuss the way it affects FL students at the university level.

In order to empower adult learners who feel discouraged or even oppressed by native speaker standards, this article argues for a critical literacies pedagogical approach grounded in the theories of progressive educational reformer Paulo Freire (1970). Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, Freire's theoretical framework urges FL practitioners to confront and deal with racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic inequities that are perpetuated by teaching a standardized (i.e., native) version of a language in a FL context (and that are no doubt projected onto racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse groups of students).

Although the concept of critical literacies is not often discussed explicitly in the context of FL teaching and learning, this article will provide a summary of research that has investigated a variety of similar issues in language education, including those related to empowerment, voice, and multilingualism. This synthesis of research will serve as preliminary evidence to support the use of a critical literacies pedagogical approach in the collegiate FL classroom. This article will conclude by offering some pedagogical suggestions for the general FL classroom and by discussing the broader implications for FL departments at the university level.

Existing Literacy-Oriented Theories and Discussions in the FL Context

Literacy-oriented theories with critical thinking components and empowerment objectives are by no means absent from research on SLA and FL

> **"The native speaker is therefore an imaginary archetype that does not – simply because it cannot – represent all of the nuances that constitute a language and a culture."**

teaching.[2] Hasan (1996), for example, defined action literacy and reflection literacy, two types of literacy that go beyond recognition literacy. Recognition literacy is not sufficient because, although it equips learners with certain linguistic coding and decoding skills, language as a mode of social action is ignored. Action literacy, then, is the ability to understand and (re)produce the social, historical, and cultural elements of a variety of textual genres (for examples of genre-based pedagogy in FL research see Byrnes & Kord, 2001; Byrnes, Maxim, & Norris, 2010; Byrnes & Sprang, 2004; Swaffar & Arens, 2005). However, Hasan ultimately argued for reflection literacy as a means to overcome conformist discursive action. She explained that "participation in the production of knowledge will call for an ability to use language to reflect, to enquire and to analyze, which is the necessary basis for challenging what are seen as facts" (p. 408). According to Hasan, it is reflection literacy that empowers individuals to produce discourse that might contribute to society's ever-changing corpus of knowledge.

Other SLA and FL scholars (Allen, 2009; Allen & Paesani, 2010; Allen, Paesani, & Dupuy, 2015; Kern, 2000; Swaffar & Arens, 2005) have theorized literacy-oriented approaches for the FL classroom for a variety of reasons, including the need for a more nuanced learning construct that goes beyond communicative competence. Specifically, Swaffar and Arens (2005) made the following assertions about literacy in a FL context:

Literacy describes what empowers individuals to enter societies; to derive, generate, communicate, and validate knowledge and experience; to exercise expressive capacities to engage others in shared cognitive, social, and moral projects; and to exercise such agency with an identity that is recognized by others in the community. (p. 2)

Furthermore, Allen (2009) reiterated the idea that foreign language learners are not blank slates, and she referred to the New London Group's (1996) concept that students possess a number of available designs in their first language. There continues to be a trend in favor of literacy-oriented approaches as studies (Allen, 2009; Allen & Paesani, 2010) have illustrated findings that support their effectiveness.

At around the same time that language scholars began proposing literacy-oriented theories for the FL classroom, the Modern Language Association (MLA) organized the Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages – a committee of noted FL scholars led by former MLA President Mary Louise Pratt – to study the best way to teach foreign languages and culture in higher education. This committee was initially formed to examine the "sense of crisis around what came to be known as the nation's language deficit" (MLA, 2007, para. 2), and the effects of this crisis on FL teaching in colleges and universities. The resulting MLA Report (2007) asserted that an ethnocentric and patronizing mentality on the part

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[2] The terms second language (L2) and foreign language (FL) are sometimes used interchangeably, but there is a difference between the two. A foreign language (FL) is most often learned at a distance from where it is actually spoken (e.g., learning French at a university in the United States). For this reason, students often have less exposure to the language than they would if they were immersed in the culture where the language is spoken. On the other hand, second language (L2) learning happens (most often) when an individual is living in an environment where the language typically spoken is other than their

first language, and they are learning that second language as a result. Immigrants to the United States, for example, are labeled English as Second Language (ESL) learners because they are in a culture where English is primarily spoken, but English is not their first language. Although this article is primarily concerned with learners of a foreign language, the obstacles (i.e., the idea of the native speaker) are encountered by both foreign *and* second language learning. Therefore, the term second language (L2) is relevant to this research.

of American people was the source of the crisis. However, the report also advised FL departments to take responsibility for the role they play, which echoed many earlier calls for change made by other FL scholars (e.g., Barnett, 1991; Bernhardt, 1995; Henning, 1993; Hoffman & James, 1986; James, 1996). In particular, the report identified a significant separation between language instruction at the lower levels (where CLT has been the pedagogical approach) and upper-level literature courses,[3] thus dividing the study of foreign languages into two categories that should otherwise be interwoven.

One of the most notable changes made in collegiate FL education to deal with this problem took place at the Georgetown University German Department (GUGD) and was framed by the concept of multiple literacies. The major curricular revision was driven by a genre-based approach to FL teaching, which guides students' awareness of language conventions and cultural practices by way of their representation in textual genres. With this awareness, they reproduce the genres in a way that demonstrates their literacy. An overarching learning objective is that students are "competent and literate non-native users of German who can employ the language in a range of intellectual and professional contexts and who can also draw from it personal enrichment and enjoyment" (GUGD, 2011, Summary, para. 3). Byrnes, Maxim, and Norris (2010) provided evidence that learners who progress through the program generally end up as highly proficient users of German. Longitudinal data is being collected in order to further investigate the effects of the program on student learning (see GUGD, 2011).

Addressing the language/literature divide by adopting literacy-oriented instructional approaches, however, involves a major shift away from the CLT

paradigm that has been so popular among language practitioners for almost thirty years. As a result, CLT continues to masquerade in first- and second-year FL textbooks, where language and culture is standardized in an effort to promote communicative competence. Teachers may allude to the uncertainties and inconsistencies that are hallmarks of language in use, and students may get some exposure to the complex nature of the target language. However, a focus on functionality inevitably pervades the CLT classroom (Kramsch, 2006). Language lessons may be framed around some cultural content (such as the theme of ordering food in a Parisian *café*), but the emphasis on functional communication ultimately imposes a "tourist-like" (Kramsch, 2006, p. 251) identity on the language learner during the early stages of study. As students progress, the seemingly logical index to measure proficiency is governed by what a native speaker would (should and/or could) do. However, an emphasis on grammatical accuracy, native-like pronunciation, and a native-like understanding of literary texts often ends up eclipsing the language learner's potential as a multilingual subject (i.e., non-native user of the target language).

The Lingering Problem of the Native Speaker

Native speaker standards put an enormous amount of pressure on learners who are often under the impression that their non-native status puts them at an eternal disadvantage (Cook, 1999; Kramsch, 1997; Maxim, 2006). To explain why the native speaker should not represent the learning goal in the second/foreign classroom, Cook (1999) referred to Labov's (1969) recognition of ethnocentrism in linguistics, and summarized it as follows:

> People cannot be expected to conform to the norm of a group to which they do not

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[3] The traditional two-year language sequence is characterized by elementary and intermediate language instruction whereas the courses offered at the upper level

follow the traditional framework that divides the teaching of literature into the century or literary/cultural movement to which it belongs.

belong, whether groups are defined by race, class, sex, or any other feature. People who speak differently from some arbitrary group are not speaking better or worse, just differently. (p. 194)

Cook identified the way this concept is taken for granted in the second/foreign language classroom, precisely because instructed learners of a second or foreign language are judged against the standards of another group, which is that of the native speaker.

Although it might not seem quite as problematic, Cook (1999) asserted the following:

> Just as it was once claimed that women should speak like men to succeed in business, Black children should learn to speak like White children, and working-class children should learn the elaborated language of the middle class, so L2 users are commonly seen as failed native speakers. (p. 195)

In order to begin to rectify this problem, Cook distinguished between native speakers and L2 users (who were once L2 learners and are native speakers of an L1). According to Cook, L2 users should be seen as a group of their own that is not necessarily better or worse than a group of native speakers, just different. For this reason, the pedagogy in the second/foreign language classroom should set appropriate goals for L2 learners. For example, students might practice pronunciation, but an environment would be created to remind students that speaking with an accent is not necessarily a setback. From a grammatical perspective, students would be encouraged to recognize certain linguistic structures that are used infrequently in the target language or for very specific purposes, but they would not necessarily be expected to master them for spontaneous production. L2 user situations and roles should also be included to remind students that there is a community of non-native speakers who have achieved proficiency in the target language.

Literacy and multicultural education scholars have identified similar forms of not only linguistic but also cultural ethnocentrism in urban educational settings in the United States for decades (e.g., Banks, 1991; Giroux, 1988, 2011; Green, 2008). Educators often attribute failure to the fact that knowledge is institutionalized and dominant discourses are the only discourses presented by the curriculum. As a way to combat such ethnocentrism, it is the educator's responsibility to reformulate the canon by representing a plurality of voices. According to Banks (1991), such an alternative curriculum challenges the traditional concept that facts must be learned by students to become culturally literate. Students who are exposed to the dominant canon are learning a very specific type of culture (e.g., "high") that is, of course, important to consider. However, culture is not limited to dominant values and traditions, and Banks alluded to the deficiencies in privileging cultural literacy as a learning outcome because it expects students to accept information about culture without being critical. The case studies to support Banks' theories are taken from junior high and high school social studies classes, but this problem of teaching one culture to promote cultural literacy happens all too often in the FL classroom. Foreign language instructors may be under the impression that they are teaching culture when they give students general information about

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traditions and values, but these traditions and values often pertain to a particular dominant group of people.

Students often have difficulty perceiving the wealth of opportunity that is possible as a result of studying a foreign language, including the potential to develop and grow personally as they interact with new cultures using new modes of expression in a new language. Understandably, they often focus on factors such as linguistic inadequacy, cultural misunderstandings, and sheer intimidation that might impair their ability to interact with speakers of the target language in a real-life setting. These inevitable realities, which actually have the potential to be excellent moments to learn, are usually swept under the rug as failed attempts to sound like a native speaker. Furthermore, it can be difficult to convince students that the native speaker is elusive, and they often lament the fact that they did not start studying a language at an earlier age (i.e., the critical theory hypothesis). While many scholars have refuted this hypothesis about age, (e.g.. Birdsong, 2006; Marinova-Todd, Marshall, & Snow, 2000; Singleton, 2005), it often influences the belief of the general population. Even President Barack Obama, in a powerful speech on the importance of bilingualism, alluded to the idea that it would be easier for a 3-year-old to learn a language than for a 46-year-old like himself (Baker, 2011). It would not be surprising if this popular belief – rooted in the concept of the native speaker – has discouraged adults from aspiring to be successful users of a second/foreign language.

Dismantling Native Speaker Ideals

Freire (1970) introduced the educational concept of "banking" to describe the possible repercussions if one authoritative source of knowledge dictates the learning process in the classroom, which is precisely the case with the "native speaker" with "a well-defined culture" as the learning goal in the FL classroom. In essence, the banking concept of education refers to a system where the teacher is the all-knowing authority figure while the student is a blank slate; the teacher knows everything, and the student knows nothing. The teacher teaches by making deposits (i.e., information, facts, and knowledge) into the student's bank (i.e., mind). Students are ultimately expected to accept the knowledge they receive from the teacher, and there is little to no room for critical inquiry, reflection, or debate. For Freire, this is the primary educational tactic in oppressive societies (1970).

Labeling the situation in the FL classroom as oppressive might be too extreme, but pedagogical approaches that use the native speaker as a model for students to emulate can provoke the perception that there is one authoritative source of knowledge. As a result of this perception, students might fall into a trap where they willingly accept information, facts, and knowledge while their (potential) multilingual capacities and contributions are undermined. To make matters worse, students who at the early stages of the curriculum are expected to understand and appropriate the language for basic communicative purposes are suddenly expected to be literary critics of texts charged with social, historical, and cultural nuances (see MLA, 2007). Offering advanced language courses later in the curriculum that teach canonical literature only perpetuates this problem. Students are faced with a body of literature that represents the most sophisticated and artistic form of expression and is often reserved for a very elite audience.

Because a language is much more than a static system of signs, and because it is used to convey highly subjective interpretations of reality, the use of a banking model to teach language violates an individual's right to reflect, debate, disagree, and even bring a new perspective to dialogue. The teaching of a language as "foreign" is no exception, and the FL classroom is as good of a place as any to

reject the banking concept of education. In other words, the FL classroom can and should be a place that fosters the development of critical literacies, a learning outcome that has been advocated in conjunction with emancipatory or problem-posing education (e.g., Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 1998, 2011). While the concept of critical literacies is often promoted to empower men and women from socially and economically disenfranchised communities, it is relevant in the FL classroom, a space where students are often trying to overcome their perception of the native speaker who dominates their learning. Furthermore, foreign language practitioners must come to grips with the power structures that are implicitly upheld by enforcing standardized (i.e., native) language use. Even with the good intention to help *all* students learn (and learn well), many individuals (often from diverse backgrounds) are inevitably excluded from a world to which they could potentially belong but to which they do not necessarily relate due to biased textbooks or classroom teachings.

With this in mind, it is expected that by the end of a curriculum taught using pedagogy that emphasizes critical literacies development, students will be able to do the following: (1) move beyond initial stereotypes they have about the target culture; (2) express themselves creatively in the target language; (3) engage in a variety of tasks of self-expression (speaking and writing) while aware of cultural context and knowledge; (4) identify and use certain language features that are particular to certain textual genres; (5) self-reflect on their experiences as learners of another language (Hasan, 1996); (6) develop their voices within the context of the target culture; (7) communicate appropriately in a range of contexts in the target language; and (8) not only decode the foreign language and related cultural practices, but also analyze and *challenge* characteristics of these practices. It is important to keep in mind that this definition of critical literacies

insists that students occupy a unique position as adult learners of a foreign language. It is expected that students will be able to communicate adequately (as well as creatively and critically), but that should not be confused with the expectation that students will arrive at a native level of proficiency.

In Other Words: Empowerment, Voice, and Multilingualism

Although it was almost two decades ago, Maxim (1998) conducted a similar study that called for a pedagogical approach to authorize (i.e., empower) foreign language learners. He began by illustrating the problem that arises when students "uncritically [accept] the information presented by the teacher or the teacher-authorized text," and students therefore "affirm the teacher's and text's preeminence as well as their subaltern status" (p. 408). For Maxim, this problem represented the symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1999) that teachers enjoy and is granted to them. To counter this power relation, Maxim designed an activity where students were asked to critically evaluate linguistic input instead of simply viewing any given presentation as objective truth. He analyzed students' work as they participated in this process and ultimately found that "students [succeeded] at uncovering... symbolic power" and also "viewed the course and its pedagogy as a positive experience" (p. 417). While Maxim's research demonstrated the advantages of empowering foreign language learners on a small scale, the issues that were the impetus for his study still affect foreign language learners today.

However, if pedagogical approaches like Maxim's (1998) are applied on a larger scale and if entire FL curricula are carefully designed with critical literacies learning objectives in mind, the idea is that students will cultivate their voice, and they will feel empowered to express themselves in a language

other than their L1. Canagarajah's (2004) defines voice as follows:

> [Voice is] ...a manifestation of one's agency in discourse through the means of language. This largely rhetorically constructed manifestation of selfhood has to be negotiated in relation to our historically defined *identities* [...], institutional *roles* [...], and ideological *subjectivity* [...]. These three constructs... can be imposed on us or ascribed to us. But it is at the level of voice that we gain agency to negotiate these categories of self, adopt a reflexive awareness of them, and find forms of coherence and power that suit our interests. (p. 268, emphasis original)

The challenge, as Canagarajah (2014) later explained, is that the pedagogy in the classroom promotes a negotiated (not an imposed or prescribed) voice, so teachers *must* be mindful of students' investments, desires, histories, and motivations. This kind of mindfulness is critical when considering the teaching of foreign languages in North America but not often explicitly stated or acknowledged. In the same vein as ELF (e.g., Jenkins, 2006; Seidlhofer, 2011), not all students are studying a foreign language to sound like a native speaker, and they might not even plan on exchanging information with native speakers. However, all students can (and should, for that matter) become culturally sensitive, multilingual members of the global community.

Kramsch (2009) explored in great detail the very personal and embodied transformation that learners undergo as they learn a second/foreign language and thereby become multilingual individuals. She

synthesized abstract theories of language to help understand the distinct experiences on the part of the language learner. These experiences are illustrated through language memoirs, learners' testimonies, personal essays, narratives, and linguistic autobiographies. Similarly, Canagarajah (2014) explained how language learners might compose a literacy autobiography (LA) to trace their (multilingual) experiences learning a new language. These qualitative approaches to language learning, literacy development, and the research process itself acknowledge the intensely subjective nature of learning a language, which happens not only as a cognitive process, but can also be affectively and even, at times, physically demanding. To echo both Kramsch (2009) and Canagarajah (2014), the language learning process is very personal and different for everyone, and it is important to honor individual experiences.

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By the same token, it is important to keep in mind that the concept of multilingualism is diluted when FL learners are expected to demonstrate their linguistic abilities in a monolingual context. If the goal is to become multilingual in the sense that the ever-changing nature of language(s) can be discovered, practiced, and applied, the teaching and learning of a new language does not have to happen in a silo. This is particularly true in today's world, where students are learning multiple languages, people are crossing real and virtual borders, and the world itself is becoming multilingual. Kramsch (2009) explained that in addition to linguistic competence (that is relative to their personal goals and experiences), the multilingual subject

demonstrates symbolic competence,[4] or the "...ability to draw on the semiotic diversity afforded by multiple languages to reframe ways of seeing familiar events, create alternative realities, and find an appropriate subject position 'between languages,' so to speak" (pp. 200-201). This "semiotic diversity" can absolutely be highlighted when teaching adult learners foreign languages, irrespective of whether or not they are encouraged and/or motivated to develop a highly proficient linguistic competence in the target language. It is their symbolic competence that could be the benchmark by which they are deemed multilingual subjects.

The overarching concepts of empowerment, voice, and multilingualism are ultimately important so that students will eventually become individuals who can participate in society and provoke social change. This concept resonates with Gutierrez's (2008) argument that students have a (civil) right to their own languages. Unfortunately, this right is often undermined by a one-size-fits-all approach in U.S. schools propelled by the assumption that "sameness is fairness" (p. 171). Gutierrez argued that schools must engage students in language practices that honor students' right to language and literacy. While it may not seem as obvious, this is just as true in the FL classroom as it is anywhere else. These rights can be honored as students develop their voices, a sense of symbolic competence, and critical literacies in a foreign language.

Writing Poetry to Develop Critical Literacies

According to researchers of language, literacy, cultural studies, and linguistics, poetry is a powerful genre that gives students the space to develop their (multilingual) voice and, by extension, critical literacies. In a strictly FL context, for example, Maxim (2006) explicitly described the ways in which the reading and writing of poetry gives adult FL learners a voice. He reiterated the importance of a literacy-based approach to foreign language teaching and addressed the possible benefits of teaching poetry at the early stages of foreign language learning. Maxim acknowledged that using poetry in the beginning-level FL classroom has its drawbacks: students may feel like poetry exemplifies a level of language that they will never attain, especially as adult language learners. Maxim contradicted this assumption and explained that by following a methodology proposed by Mayley & Duff (1989) where adult FL learners read, and more importantly, write their own poetry, they can develop unique linguistic and even non-linguistic skills to the FL classroom. Most importantly, Maxim described how writing poetry in the FL classroom can actually "deemphasize the primacy of the native speaker" (p. 252) and dismantle the idea that the foreign language is "some monolithic entity that [students] are fated to never master" (p. 253). By writing poetry in the foreign language, students are encouraged to play with words and develop their identity.

Hanauer (2012) also proposed the idea of using poetry as a way to humanize the FL classroom. In response to students' as well as instructors' concerns that writing poetry in lower-level FL courses might be too difficult, Hanauer analyzed a corpus of 844 second language poems generated over the course of six years and used a range of instruments to measure

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[4] "Symbolic competence" evolved from Kramsch's idea of "third culture," which was a notion initially coined as "third space" by Bahbha (1994). Essentially, third culture represents the symbolic space that language learners occupy as they navigate between two dichotomies, such as the L1 and the L2, the self and the other, or the "country of origin" and the "host country." While third culture was initially conceived as multiple and always subject to change, Kramsch (2009) decided it only really accounted for *two* opposing discourses present throughout the FL learning process, when in today's world many learners are negotiating multiple ones. For this reason, Kramsch redefined the notion of third culture as symbolic competence.

"text size, lexical category, the Lexical Frequency Profile (Laufer & Nation, 1999), poetic features, thematic organization, lexical content and degree of emotionality" (Hanauer, 2012, p. 111). Based on these analyses, Hanauer found that students' poetry was emotive and expressive. He also found that students managed to use simple (yet effective) vocabulary while also emphasizing visual imagery. Hanauer concluded that poetry writing is well within the abilities of FL students. Furthermore, Hanauer (2010) deemed poetry a genre that gives students the opportunity to "learn about themselves, about the presence of others, and the diversity of thought and experience that are so much a part of this world" (p. 114). This is precisely the goal of a critical literacies pedagogical approach with a more explicit focus on the pluralities of language and culture as a way to empower FL learners.

Cahnmann (2006) and Cahnmann-Taylor and Preston (2008) made the pluralities of language and culture their main focus by investigating the use of poetry as a vehicle for biliteracy development. In particular, they encouraged students (mostly elementary school children) to write their poetry in both English and Spanish. Cahnmann-Taylor and Preston (2008) identified the element of risk intrinsic to writing poetry that is very similar to what learners experience when they try to express themselves in different languages: in the same way that a willingness to fail is the only way to succeed as a poet, a willingness to be misunderstood is the only way to express oneself. In a way, as students accept this willingness to fail by writing poetry in both English and Spanish, they can reflect on their multifaceted identity as users of more than one language. The process also deemphasizes the standardization of languages and the "monolingual

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contexts [that] expect bilinguals to have perfectly balanced language sheets in their brains" (Cahnmann, 2006, p. 346). This standardization, which may often be advertised in learning context as a means to help the student learn more about a particular language in question, actually ignores the reality that languages, and the ways people use languages, are not mutually exclusive. Cahnmann-Taylor and Preston (2008) explained how students can build their creativity, critical thinking skills, and confidence as they write poetry in a space that recognizes the reality of language use.

Similarly, in high school English writing courses, Fisher (2007) and Jocson (2008) researched the effects of teaching spoken word poetry in urban classrooms, since spoken word poetry became such a popular mode of expression among teenagers in the late nineties. Although Fisher (2008) noticed initial tensions as students were reluctant to share their (very personal) work, they eventually encouraged each other to cultivate their own language. Fisher called this kind of encouragement "Students' Right to Their Own Language" (STROL). Jocson (2008) found that, by writing poetry, students were able to rewrite misperceptions and stereotypes, which forced them to "imagine themselves as active members of society and as agents in changing the course of their lives and others'" (p. 129). Although these studies did not take place in a FL context, the process of writing poetry helps students accept, envision, and participate in the culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse world that is their reality.

In keeping with this concept of poetry as a medium to empower students, Keneman (2015) recently conducted a study specifically on the use of slam poetry in the FL classroom to foster critical literacies

development. In this study, a pedagogical approach using the slam poetry art form was designed and integrated into a standard intermediate curriculum (French 201) to foster critical literacies. Students were asked to analyze and (re)produce slam poems, and qualitative data were collected to investigate how the pedagogical approach influenced student learning. Findings indicated that most students valued the opportunity to practice linguistic features (i.e., grammar points) by producing work that was of personal importance to them. While students were not always aware of their own linguistic progress and critical literacies development, their final slam poems revealed their efforts to convey their sense of self as well as their "cross-cultural awareness" (Kramsch & Nolden, 1994, p. 28) in a way that was often linguistically appropriate and stylistically sophisticated. Furthermore, students shared their work in a process that allowed them to envision their successful L2 work as worthy of textual analysis.

Student Empowerment in Foreign Languages

Empowering the foreign language learner has other, much broader implications for foreign language departments at universities across the nation. In particular, the elimination of foreign language departments over the past several years has made national news (e.g., Berman, 2011; Corral & Patai, 2008; Foderaro, 2010). As a result, many foreign language faculty members blame powerful, top-tier administrators who seem to be on a neoliberal mission to undermine the humanities. While this blame is understandable, warranted, and even supported by recent empirical research (Ramírez & Hyslop-Margison, 2015), foreign language educators should consider ways that collegiate foreign language learning and teaching can keep up with the changing face of education. Restructuring FL programs to adopt a critical literacies pedagogical approach has the potential to accomplish that goal.

Specifically, a critical literacies pedagogical approach could bridge the gap between foreign "language" and "literature" courses. A "lower-level language" curriculum designed using a critical literacies pedagogical approach would foster competencies that go above and beyond a tourist-like understanding of how to communicate and a knowledge of dominant cultural values.

Furthermore, some pressure might be alleviated in "upper-level literature" courses that are currently designed under the impression that students have very advanced, sometimes even native-like language skills in order to participate (Byrnes & Kord, 2001). Instead, upper-level courses would be conceived as such, not necessarily because they are more difficult from a purely linguistic perspective, but because they demand more sophisticated forms of critical thinking. To authorize their L2 voice at both the lower- and upper-levels of instruction, students would share and publish their work. In turn, more examples of successful L2 users would be available for students to witness. Ultimately, courses at all levels of instruction would be taught in a holistic, intellectually rigorous way, with the goal of empowering students to continue the study of a foreign language. Marcott (2008) alluded to this possibility when she described her motivation to continue to study Spanish thanks to the linguistic and cultural diversity represented in her favorite course. A very optimistic but real hypothesis is that such a transformation, be it high-stake and somewhat laborious from a curricular revision perspective, has the potential to strengthen the overall health of struggling FL departments.

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