Essay Review: Implications for Educators of Daniel Everett's Language: The Cultural Tool

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Abstract

This essay review discusses Everett (2012), *Language: The Cultural Tool,* with particular emphasis on implications for educators. While Everett does not belong to the discourse of pedagogy and policy for classrooms, his findings and arguments resonate powerfully with the contemporary challenges of PK-12 classrooms and teacher preparation.

Introduction

Educators who work with language learners belong to a distinct group of people who find books about language theory compelling. We can't resist a new anecdote about learning languages, making sense of words, or the possibility of finding out how humans developed language. Daniel Everett's newest book is powerful evidence of his own compulsion to learn all that he can about language, its origins, and its practice in different cultures. In a long and at times controversial career, he has learned a great deal. This is his second book for a more popular audience, and educators at all levels will find it a fascinating examination of where languages came from in human history, how humans learn them, and how linguists have come to engage in profound disagreement about the nature of language learning. Moreover, while Everett does not belong to the discourse of pedagogy and policy for American classrooms, his findings and arguments resonate powerfully with the contemporary challenges of PK-12 classrooms and teacher preparation.

Discussion

After decades of fieldwork among indigenous language users in South America, Everett has come to believe that much conventional wisdom about language is just plain wrong. More specifically, Everett challenges the entire structure of Chomsky's seminal work on universal grammar, the Language Acquisition Device (LAD), and the proposition that language learning is at heart an innate process for human beings. At the heart of Everett's argument is his conviction that languages solve particular communication problems in particular communities, an understanding that stands in contrast to Innatist arguments that all humans learn languages according to *a priori* tools hard-wired in the brain. In staking this claim, Everett offers a powerful challenge to much contemporary thought that insists on the rule-based nature of language learning.

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A particular strength of Everett's work is his use of foundational ideas in knowledge and epistemology to create analogies and metaphors for thinking about our understanding of language. For readers in teacher preparation, Everett's comparison of Plato, Aristotle, and Charles Saunders Peirce is a timely reworking of foundations of educational philosophy. He describes Plato and the dialogue *Meno* to illustrate how a strong version of cognitive science (including Noam Chomsky and Steven Pinker, among others) has created an elaborate abstract ideal of how languages came to be, grow, and are perpetuated. By contrast to this Platonic idealism, he invokes Aristotelian realism as a paradigm of investigative inquiry into language.

In this model, learning about language is facilitated by actual qualitative experiences of language use, and not abstract models. Everett provides examples from the *Piraha* people of the Amazon, examples that show how deeply rooted in culture these indigenous grammars can be, and examples that violate many accepted truths of the ideal of universal grammar as taught in American universities for three decades now.

Everett is in fact arguing for a paradigm shift in thinking about language, and while he does not cite Kuhn's (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* he evinces an understanding of how knowledge models shift across time. He rejects behaviorism, like Chomsky before him, as an oversimplified version of human learning, but he also rejects abstract models of language learning that suggest that all learners experience language acquisition according to some algorithm. Ultimately Everett's sympathies are with constructivist approaches akin to the theories of Vygotsky. He states, "Meaning is the map of our words to their concepts or to the things our words stand for or represent in the non-linguistic world.   In connecting our words to the world, meaning is the roadmap of our existence" (2012, p. 153). In an era of high-stakes tests and much attention to skill-based assessment, Everett's arguments have importance for educators and those who prepare teachers precisely because they reinforce rich, constructivist models of language acquisition.

Even so, it is often the case that competing paradigms govern our views of language, and consequently, the work that educators do with language learners. These competing views can have the effect of confounding pedagogy and policy, even for the practitioners closest to the action of teaching language to schoolchildren. As Krashen (2008) argues, language learning has long been described under one paradigm, the skill-building hypothesis, in which teacher "inputs" to learners are built of discrete skills, all of which must be mastered before actual communication is encouraged. For example, Pinker (1994), Chomsky's most eminent disciple today, argues that the lack of phonics instruction is solely responsible for reading struggles in school children. By comparison, the *Homo loquax* that Everett describes is a creature of flexibility, diversity, and cognitive creativity. This paradigm of language application is one in which these features of human language use argue for language instruction emphasizes communication and interaction. Krashen (2008) argues for this approach, one more aligned with language learning as a set of tools for actual communication. If reading is about communication, then meaningful reading has a place in curriculum too, and the use of phonics or skill-based instruction that are assessed in tests must be balanced with interesting texts that connect readers to culture and meaning.

While arguments about the means of language acquisition can seem abstract, even esoteric, in contemporary education such arguments are central to debates about pedagogy, achievement gaps in American classrooms, and the communicative prompts teachers use to

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describe language learning tasks. Most current textbooks of linguistic theory, including many that address ELL topics, use Chomsky's Innatist rationale, including the concepts of Universal Grammar and the LAD, as exemplary current knowledge of how language works, and how it is learned. In this model, language is a set of algorithms or tools innately wired in the human brain and essential to our cognitive activity. Everett argues that language use and learning is much more a function of the very flexible and plastic human brain, a brain that utilizes its capacity to produce a variety of tools, including means of communication that include production of language. This very flexibility is a major factor in the production of the diversity and complexity of language use across the world, and across cultures, all of which solve communication problems in specific cultural contexts. In focusing on the cultural dynamic of language, Everett approaches cognition from the perspective of its general utility for solving problems, with language being a case of a specialized tool that facilitates problem-solving: "Although many researchers have done a wonderful job of laying out what we know about how language develops in a child, no one has demonstrated that the stages of development that children pass through in their linguistic experience are not just part of more general stages that have effects in many other stages of cognition" (2012, p. 101). In this model, brains acquire cognition by biological imperatives, but language gains are very much an environmentally driven process of cognition. This process has interactivity and communication at the center of language learning

The followers of Interactionist theory as illustrated by the work of Swain, Krashen, and Cummins, among others, will find much to admire in this approach to utility, practical interaction, and communication as a search for comprehensibility. Everett offers detailed descriptions of how interactions and discourse conventions inform language, creating the very forms that we value as language constructs within our cultural contexts. His critique of the "strong instinct" movement in language theory leads him to emphasize the ways in which discourse determines what we value in language. He cites Aristotle in this regard: "Every sentence has meaning, not as being the natural means by which a physical faculty is realized, but, as we have said, by convention" (2012, p. 187). In Everett's view, Aristotle would agree that cultural convention shapes our language use.

Today's emphasis on *academic language* is just such a case. The forms of language that students produce grow out of the cultural conventions that define school experience, just as the content-knowledge of academic standards are expressed in language that academic discourse has come to value. To quote Everett, "… [E]ach culture determines which generalizations are most important to it, its vocabulary reflecting its priorities of knowledge. Lexical distinctions -- types of nouns, verbs, modifiers, and so on -- are established in order to communicate about topics valued by a particular culture" (2012, p. 243). Of course, without appropriate and dynamic interaction, these means of communication disintegrate, and the gap between effective language users and the novices increases. In this respect, Everett's discussion of cultural influence on language is also an explanation for the difficulties learners have with academic prompts and assessments that are not culturally bound to their own language use.

Increasingly, to be American is to be in the midst of language acquisition and language diversity. In the United States, language use is changing, as demographic trends in all fifty states can attest. It is not lost on Everett that his expertise about language is not shared by most Americans because of cultural factors imbedded in our society: "Many Americans, like other

populations, live separated from other languages by economic, social, and geographic barriers" (2012, p. 228). These separations can create a general ignorance of linguistic principles and theory, a phenomenon that most educators worry about whether they are concerned with PK-12 language learning, adult literacy, or the preparation of effective language teachers. Tragically, such attitudes are highly correlated with bad policy, lack of attention to language extinction among indigenous peoples, and monolithic beliefs about the nature of literacy in school. Everett argues: "…[O]ur current educational system does not help students understand why different English dialects exist and what they are like" (2012, p. 232). These separations can serve to reinforce practices, which treat language acquisition as implicit learning, and classrooms that take language for granted are too often the result.

Implications

What does explicit language teaching look like if one commits to a constructivist model such as Everett describes? What does this look like in a classroom in an age of high-stakes tests, mandated standards, and proliferating assessments of teacher performance? How does one navigate the competing paradigms of language learning? First, no educator should fool herself that teaching skills to the test will be an enduring strategy for facilitating a love of learning language. Short-term skill building has a place, but it is limited, and encouraging it for the test scores is not enough. This does not mean we need not or should not teach language skills. In his tales of work among indigenous people, and in his multiple examples drawn from everyday life, Everett shows us how rich language understandings are a combination of understanding people, their narratives, their culture, and the specific attributes of their language. Everett recounts experiences where cultural and linguistic biases suggested that the language of native speakers could not be what he was hearing – it just was not right according to conventional knowledge as he understood it. But, as he increasingly found, language is more about meaning-making in specific contexts, than it is about abstract rules.

As teachers we can learn from this. An unfortunate (but perhaps unintended) consequence of the Universal Grammar hypothesis, and of much language arts instruction that follows its influence, is that the actual workings of language became less and less commonly the conversation of American classrooms. Everett has asked many grammar questions of his *Piraha* hosts over the years, but grammar is always a part of a larger conversation: how does one achieve the skills and tasks of survival? How does one tell the stories of daily life? How does one narrate and relate cultural stories? How do we build the signs that give meaning to our thoughts? How do we communicate fluently and accurately in writing targeted toward our audiences? As educators we extend the questions: How do we instill a vital love of language learning in our students, even as we teach them skills that are critical components of our current propensity to measure learning?

As Everett models for us, grammar knowledge is indeed highly useful in understanding how communication is achieved in both oral and written culture; however, it is knowledge of grammar within culturally meaningful contexts that should be our goal. A troubling reality, though, is the fact that recent generations of young people learned relatively little grammar in American schools, and students of teaching have only recently been asked to meta-cognitively

reflect on the way language governs their own learning. In this new era, students and teachers are under pressure to learn and manipulate grammar, articulate the academic language of their content study, and catalogue the language features that are so often measured in high stakes assessments. We face a new gap, and it stems from our uneven preparation in understanding the basics of the very language that we will teach to schoolchildren.

Understanding grammar in rule-based ways is a start, but it is not enough. Knowing enough grammar to correct student errors will not suffice, though, if our goal is deep language learning. Error correction alone is not enough to produce rich language learning in pupils. Everett reminds us, as Krashen (2008) argues, that a deficit model of language use is an impoverished model. Using teacher expertise about language solely as a tool to engage in correcting learners' errors is a mistake. Teaching grammar as a weapon to illustrate learners' shortcomings is a tempting practice when stakes are high, but hardly productive. We must heed the importance of meaningful input and output, whether through culturally relevant instruction, *realia*, authentic and engaging texts, or teaching content with thoughtful sheltering. Moreover, we must model the teaching of language in meta-linguistic ways – emphasizing teaching about how to think about and question language use.

Everett's rejection of Universal Grammar suggests the importance of revisiting grammar and language arts in the classroom. Because Universal Grammar suggested an innate acquisition of grammatical principles in learners, teachers often did not emphasize explicit teaching of grammar. While this pedagogy was often motivated by laudable aims, it seemed to infer that grammar was not of value, or could not be taught and learned. Everett shows us how grammar can be meaningfully integrated in conversations about language, taking us from diagramming sentences (the Reed-Kellogg diagram) to how signs work in communication (semiotics), to morphology: "Morphology is the set of principles that regulate the way that a language forms words….The brain must be able to encode (assemble) and decode." Preparing teachers and K-12 learners to think about language in these complex ways is not among Everett's topics, but it could not be a timelier reminder, given the propensity of contemporary assessments to measure "hard skills" such as grammatical knowledge, and given a justifiable emphasis on the academic language at work in classrooms. Current discussions of academic language fit this bill nicely, and exercises in teacher preparation such as the Teacher Performance Assessment (TPA) ask novice teachers to work metacognitively through the challenges of their own professional language, the language they will use with learners, and the language to be acquired by PK-12 classroom learners.

Conclusion

As we are called to teach language theory and skill to our learners, we may despair at finding ourselves a long way from addressing the richness of language in the fashion that Everett models for us, and a long way from answering the most difficult questions posed. This is a challenge for liberal education in PK-12 settings as well as higher education. But it is also very much an opportunity -- an opportunity for better democratic education in contemporary schools PK-16, schools that are increasingly defined by their demographic diversity and their linguistic variety. For this reason, a true liberal arts education should have linguistic knowledge at its core.

Everett argues that our new understandings of brains and cognition should make study of language diversity of paramount importance:

> But when a language dies, we all lose. When a language is born, we gain -- the natural specialization of our species. Learning a second language can help to form partnerships, but for the species as a whole, depth and breadth of knowledge are best served by language diversity. The story of Babel is in fact a reminder of the beauty of this diversity, of human cognitive flexibility -- we are not, after all, dogs that all bark alike! We are *Homo sapiens.* We are *Homo loquax.* (2012, p. 326)

We should strive for a celebration of multilingualism, language variety, and the rewards of learning more than one language. It is an obvious clarion call for better educational policy, where language learning initiatives are celebrated, valued, and funded. It is critical that we develop pedagogies that engage students and teacher in constructing knowledge about language. The new challenges resulting from the confluence of assessments, diverse language learners, and the need to address achievement gaps, offer a rich possibility. It is the possibility of teaching language explicitly as a highly valued cultural tool, and not merely a natural phenomenon that we acquire innately. Krashen emphasizes that we must "inform students how language and literacy are acquired" (p. 183, 208). No doubt Everett would agree.

In his careful descriptions of how language in all of its manifestations, from phonology to grammar to semiosis, Everett provides a powerful model of language inquiry. In doing so, Everett is also wise to invoke Peirce, the towering linguist - pragmatist of late nineteenth century prominence. Pragmatism, Everett reminds us, is not about perfect architectures of truth; instead, it is about finding how things can be worked out in the real world. To quote Everett, "Language reveals the engine of our souls, our mind. It illuminates us and energizes us. We share it with all we meet. It is the cognitive fire of human life" (2012, p. 327). For those of us who work to teach language, to help learners acquire a second language, or to help teachers become adept with teaching language, such practical and reality-based inquiry is a breath of fresh air.

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Suggested Reading with Annotations

Chomsky, N. (1959). Review of verbal behavior. *Language. (35)*1, 26-58.

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Chomsky's seminal article on B.F. Skinner's philosophy of language learning. It is a starting point for an understanding of universal grammar and Chomskian language theory.

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Lightbown and Spada offer a wise synthesis of theories of language acquisition, including comparisons between various schools of thought for language learning, from Behaviorism to Innatism to Interactionist Theory.

Snow, C. & Uccelli, P. (2009). The challenge of academic language. In D. Olson & J. Larsen, (Eds.) *The Cambridge Handbook of Literacy* (pp. 112-133). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Educators will no doubt recognize the timeliness of academic language as a concern for learners in classrooms, as well as for the preparation of effective teachers. Snow and Uccelli offer a comprehensive treatment of what we know about the conventions of academic language. The writers offer rich description of the variation within academic discourse from conventions of grammar, semantics, and morphology, to differences between disciplines, and ultimately, call for more investigation of the phenomenon across many levels of instruction.

Pinker, S. (1994). *The Language Instinct.* New York: William Morrow.

A compelling thinker of the Chomskian school makes his case for Universal Grammar, the innate language acquisition instinct, and vision of language learning governed by particular neuro-cognitive structures.

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