



## **Book review: *Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching***

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Farrell, T.S.C. (2017). *Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching*. Alexandria, Virginia. TESOL Press, vi + 50 pp.

*Summary:* Sociolinguistics and its importance for TESOL curricula occupy the limelight in Farrell's fresh addition to the English Language Teacher Development series. Here, educators will find the relevance of sociolinguistics for themselves and their students via accessible summaries of established sociolinguistics research and poignant, reflective discussion questions.

*Keywords:* sociolinguistics; teaching; inequality; gender; society; professional development

**In a recent essay, Korthagen (2017)** proposes that in-service teacher trainers may spur their mentees' development by connecting "the personal strengths of people in schools with academic knowledge" (p. 399). In other words, he argues that teacher educators' common mission is not solely to present infographics of recent research articles, but rather to facilitate the charting out of paths in which empirical findings can harmonize with assets already possessed by their mentees. Resources that work toward this end come at an urgent time, given contemporary

recommendations for more robust TESOL training curricula among teachers in U.S. public schools (Pettitt et al., 2017).

Sociolinguistics, an area of linguistics which sidesteps normative ideals for language use in favor of how said languages are manifest among actual humans, may hold promise in strengthening ties between TESOL teachers and their linguistically diverse students. One goal of sociolinguists is to highlight ways in which negative attitudes toward “nonstandard” language use coincide with prejudice and discrimination toward the users of such language varieties (Holmes, 2008, as cited in Farrell, 2017). Farrell, no stranger to teacher development, branches out with a book entitled *Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching* (2017). A cornerstone of the book is that reflection on factors that contribute to language diversity pave the way toward recognizing each student’s linguistic differences as strengths. While I have not had a chance to use the book in practice, I recommend it due to the ways in which it differs from other available books on sociolinguistics and language pedagogy. An edited volume of the same title (McKay & Hornberger, 1996), and its “spiritual sequel” (Hornberger & McKay, 2010) (containing updated research), broach many of the same topics as does Farrell (2017), albeit in greater detail. Piller’s (2016) *Linguistic Diversity and social justice: An introduction to applied sociolinguistics*, using an accessible yet scholarly style, not unlike Malcolm Gladwell’s engrossing works on social psychology, takes an empirical approach to the role that understanding language diversity can play in social change. However, unlike Farrell’s (2017) text, none of the other books discussed in this paragraph contains a useful array of questions with the potential to open up meaningful discussions between cohorts. The three books would, however, work well in tandem with Farrell’s text for readers looking to dive deeper into specific areas of sociolinguistics.

Every chapter, containing about 9 discussion questions each, consists of two sections: the first summarizes the current state of sociolinguistic research relevant to the chapter, while the second establishes practical connections of said findings for TESOL teachers. Chapter I offers a definition of sociolinguistics and its emphasis on describing language use, rather than enforced, Platonic ideals thereof. Farrell adds that, despite nearly 50 years since the publication of the first article linking sociolinguistics and TESOL, research on this connection has seen little progress. The author argues that this discrepancy is conspicuous, given the prospective benefits of recognizing language diversity in terms of reality rather than demanding, yet illusory criteria held up as both desirable and attainable.

The subsequent chapters offer practical suggestions for a pedagogy guided by nuanced understandings of English-language learners' personal experiences. Chapter II, "Multilingualism," reviews prior research on the challenges toward and benefits of allowing English-language learners to remain in touch with their home languages (cf. Montalvo Balbed & McCormack Mussetti, 2015; González, Moll & Amanti, 2006). Chapter III, "Which English? Whose English?" presents the ideal of "Standard English" as a construct that varies considerably by situational context and geographical region. However, Farrell points out that not all regions enjoy comparable levels of prestige. Accordingly, the promotion of an appreciation among students for all varieties of English is crucial in fostering meaningful, intercultural communication both inside and outside the classroom. Chapter IV, "Language and Gender" addresses Western societies' expectations for women to adhere more closely to norms of propriety. Here, Farrell encourages teachers to work against these inequalities by pointing out elements of sexist language and stereotypes in teaching materials. Chapter V, "Identity in Language Learning and Teaching," focuses on the notion that learners may assume new

identities while drawing from their home lives and learning environments. Farrell argues that identity research holds value for TESOL teachers, provided they establish parallels between the past and the present. That is, through discussion questions, teachers would do well to compare and contrast their own in-class behaviors as children in the past with those of their students in the present.

At the administrative level, Chapter VI, “Language Planning”, discusses discrepancies between classroom teachers' beliefs about teaching and those held by educational policymakers. In light of these disparities, TESOL teachers are encouraged to listen to and question the validity of such policies, adjusting practice according to students' needs.

The final chapter, “Reflecting on Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching” summarizes an earlier case study of students in an MATESOL course entitled “Sociolinguistics Applied to Language Teaching.” Students' reflection assignments addressed a *mélange* of complex sentiments toward code switching, unequal power relations, as well as the legitimacy of language varieties. The majority of M.A. students in the course reported a heightened sense of clarity toward the need for applications of sociolinguistics to TESOL (Farrell, 2015).

Taken as a whole, Farrell offers a brief, yet accessible perspective on the relevance of sociolinguistics to pre- and in-service teachers. In-service teachers may find themselves more familiar with the book's content than would their pre-service counterparts. However, given the heterogeneity of experience levels in most teacher development cohorts, the book's questions may allow for discussion participants to learn even more from each other. Further, some readers may wish for more detailed examples that support Farrell's assertions. In such cases, referring to the articles found in the book's thorough bibliography will prove indispensable, in addition to the

three similar works identified in this review (McKay & Hornberger, 1996; Hornberger & McKay, 2010; Pillier, 2016).

Concerning the work's relevance toward educational contexts in Georgia, the reader is invited to peruse earlier issues of *GATESOL in Action*. Montalvo Balbed's & McCormack Musetti's (2015) and Poindexter's (2016) articles, for instance, would work well in tandem with this book for discussions on multiple languages and language varieties as assets for students success.

Finally, with continued funding toward the U.S. Government's Office of English Language Acquisition (at the time of writing) uncertain (Downey, 2018), some may begin to hold a grim view of the future of TESOL in Georgia. Yet one must not forget about recent calls for educators to remain hopeful toward the continued renovation of TESOL (e.g., Mantegna, 2014) in Georgia's current political climate (i.e., Pendergrass, 2017). Texts that bring a transfusion of knowledge to the TESOL canon, such as Farrell's, may represent a vital force for the sustained success of English-teachers here and abroad.

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