

**Review - Multiliteracy Play: Designs and Desires in the Second Language Classroom**, by Chantelle Warner, Bloomsbury Academic, 2024, 226 pages, 9781350338371 Hardcover

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Language learning and teaching is often presented as reducible to clear-cut linguistic and pedagogical principles, systems, and techniques. Yet, language learning and use is a human phenomenon, which can be messy, emotional, unpredictable, and playful. What actually happens in the language learning classroom is not completely captured by plans, procedures, content, or best practices, but it can be challenging to theorize what happens between, beyond, and instead of these things. In *Multiliteracy Play: Designs and Desires in the Second Language Classroom*, Chantelle Warner draws on a wide range of theory and research in the fields of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), literacy and multiliteracy, and beyond to address the emergent and unpredictable in language teaching and learning, ultimately presenting a critical-affective/aesthetic approach to multiliteracy-focused second language instruction based on a carefully considered and theorized concept of play. This is, as the author notes on p. 183, not a new model but a set of perspectives informing existing frameworks. Warner draws on her SLA experience as a teacher, researcher, and co-director of the Center for Educational Resources in Culture, Language, and Literacy at the University of Arizona.

The book is organized in two sections, with the first establishing the key concepts and research and the second developing the perspectives on multiliteracy frameworks with three illustrative cases focusing on play in language learning. The introduction makes the case for the need for a critical-affective approach in language learning that goes beyond the predominant systematic content focus in SLA (indeed, troubling the “acquisition” part of the appellation) by recognizing aesthetic, affective, and ideological elements of language learning and use. Warner takes as a natural starting point Tim Krashen’s (1982) concept of affective filter, a widely taught and recognized acknowledgement of the role of emotion in language learning. She follows the “multi-” turn in SLA (e.g. multilingualism and multiliteracies) and sets a sound theoretical foundation for the rest of the book. In chapter 1, she introduces the multiliteracies framework of the New London Group (1996). Multiliteracy theory is often understood as focusing on broad and multimodal conceptions of text and literacy. The reader would be well cautioned to not assume this is the focus of multiliteracy here, as Warner emphasizes another aspect of this work: literacy as design. This positions learners as working with existing designs, agentively designing meaning with them, and redesigning themselves in the process. She focuses on the later work of Cope and Kalantzis (2009) that further articulates this design framework, and she connects it to SLA theory and practice.

Warner notes that, for all its student-centered agentive focus, there is danger that multiliteracy design can become one more inflexible orthodoxy. To remedy this, in chapter two she turns to a theoretical world of heterodoxy: Desire. Here, she draws on the concept of affect, which is related to, but not synonymous with, emotion. Rather, affect concerns intensities, the moment-to-moment embodied becoming experienced by individuals and groups. This theory allows Warner to consider that which can’t be easily captured in lesson plans or systematic theories of learning. To take one example, Warner notes that educators may not be at their most effective by working with emotions as having binary good/bad connotations, in the sense of striving to avoid “bad” emotions such as frustration and anger. Rather, these emotional dynamics can be treated as affective intensities occurring in the overall experience of the classroom. Thinking this way may not help educators predict what will happen, but it might help them account for differences in what is actually produced in the classroom. Warner illustrates this

point with a description of two teachers employing the same lesson plan and activities with very different results. Warner provides theory and perspective to account for these differences through the lens of affect and desire.

In the second section of the book, Warner addresses a key question: How can teachers work with aspects of language classrooms and learning that resist planning? She answers this through the theoretical concept of play. Introducing some established research on the topic, she then presents three articulations of play informed by multiliteracy design and specifically related to language learning and teaching: Play with designs, designing playfully, and redesigning through play.

It should be noted that the “play” in the title does not mean this is an early childhood education book. Though many of the theories of play Warner discusses are based in the study of children and early learning, Warner’s illustrative cases are all from post-secondary language classrooms. The pedagogical considerations of design, affect, and play are meant to apply to adult learning at least as much as that of children (and the latter group is simply not much of a focus here). If anything, the detailed framework is more necessary for recommending, guiding, and justifying play as a pedagogical activity for adult learners. Notably, in chapter two Warner includes a discussion of a student who, in post-activity reflections, rejected a multiliteracy activity, with theories of affect and desire adding depth and nuance to a real situation teachers might encounter in asking learners to deviate from well-defined pedagogical paths.

In the following three chapters Warner presents vignettes and cases from university language classrooms that illustrate poetic play, translation play (drawing on the work of Alcázar Silva, 2022), and speculative play. These chapters highlight the application of Warner’s theory of design, desire, and play to poetry composition in German, the creation of Spanish language public service announcements with corresponding English texts, and a multi-stage Italian language research project. The latter two, in particular, work across multiple literacies as students draw together various digital and linguistic elements. Warner highlights the operation of play and desire in the students’ choices and expression in these projects, showing the individuality and richness of the process and products of two students per chapter.

The concluding chapter is effective in its brevity, pulling in the focus of the book. Warner presents three principles based on the perspectives, theories, and frameworks of the preceding chapters. She holds that we should center language learners as redesigners, that is, people who are transformed by their language learning and activity. Warner emphasizes that this process is not linear, or predictable, or even comfortable and safe, but it better reflects the lived reality of learning than sterile views of language learning and teaching as design alone (sans desire). Second, she highlights language teaching and learning as the creation of spaces of possibility rather than codified processes, and that these are multiple and incomplete by nature. She closes by expressing the hopeful nature of language teaching and learning, with hope standing for plurality, partiality, dispersal in the affective present.

Though this book is aimed at influencing classroom practice, the focus on theory and scholarship make it suitable for an academic audience. Warner covers a wide theoretical range and does it well. She does this in such a way that those in the SLA world would find here an excellent introduction to many concepts and theorists in the multiliteracy and affect/nonlinear/posthuman world. Where the latter is concerned, Warner does a commendable job presenting the work of, for example, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) in accessible and concretely applicable terms, meaning little prior familiarity with this theory is needed. This is no small feat. She also manages to connect these to sociocultural theory (particularly Vygotsky’s

theory of play), the critical pedagogy of Freire (1970) and, of course, the complex framework of multiliteracies as presented by the New London Group (1996) and the design work of Cope and Kalantzis (e.g. 2009). The work of Claire Kramsch and colleagues (e.g. 2009), addressing as it does language learning in “post-” terms (e.g. post-structuralism) is prominent in Warner’s work, as is the affect focused multiliteracy work of Leander and Boldt (2013; 2018).

The wide range of theoretical ground covered is both a strength and a (minor) weakness of the book. What Warner has set out to do in bringing these theories into conversation is ambitious, and she does a fairly good job drawing a through-line across these different, sometimes arguably disparate, theoretical worlds. She has created a complex theoretical assemblage that does work, with the caveat that it works *eventually*. The reader may find themselves covering a lot of ground before things come together for them. Patience is rewarded.

Ultimately, Warner’s book represents a valuable contribution to the field of SLA, drawing together theories, concepts, and frameworks from varied areas to present a result that is not only coherent but also applicable to classroom practice. If the theory and principles presented by Warner seem difficult to grasp or apply, that is perhaps the point: Language teaching and learning entails much that is difficult to capture in words, theories, and frameworks. Language teachers must deal with these challenges nonetheless. Warner has provided an accessible discussion to aid that task.

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