Language Teachers' Philosophies of Teaching: Bases for Development and Possible Lines of Investigation

Graham Crookes*
Department of Second Language Studies, University of Hawai'i at Manoa

Abstract

The area of philosophy of education provides resources for language teachers' development of personal philosophies of teaching. The article reviews the need for such entities and discusses the conceptual resources available for their development as well as related research in applied linguistics. Although the field of teacher cognition is identified as a close neighbor of the area, the small amount of relevant empirical research available suggests that little is known about how language teachers develop philosophies of teaching or use resources in this area. A research agenda is advanced with an emphasis on aims in philosophies of teaching.

1. Introduction

The views of language teachers about their professional practice, along with related investigations of their values or beliefs, have been only a minor part of the academic literature of the language teaching and researching communities. However, a thin thread of expert commentary in both applied linguistics and education has always supported the idea that language teachers can and should articulate principles or higher aspirations concerning their professional activity. Increasingly, contract renewal processes and job interviews call for a brief statement of something called a 'philosophy of teaching'. Some educational specialists view this item, as well as more formal and developed work associated with it, to be part of their academic responsibilities and investigative actions – the main area in which such work is done is 'philosophy of education'. The beginnings of applications of concepts from this area to applied linguistics are increasingly to be seen, and will be discussed in this paper in terms of their possible relationship to language teachers' views, values, and philosophies concerning the teaching of second, foreign, or heritage languages.

Empirical and conceptual study of teachers and teaching in the fields of language and linguistics (notably within applied linguistics) that was independent of research on language learning accelerated in the late 1980s, with work on teacher education in general (e.g. Richards and Nunan 1990), narrower aspects such as the teaching practicum (Richards and Crookes 1988), and crucially, studies of teachers' 'beliefs, attitudes and knowledge' (e.g. Grotjahn 1991; Woods 1996). The middle 1990s also saw an increasingly reflective, self-critical, and socially critical strand of thought begin to appear in the field. We now have a greater willingness for professionals in language teaching to ask 'what are we doing?' in association with a question like 'what are our aims? (as teachers and specialists in this field)', and to pose such questions not just in terms of specific classroom practices, nor in terms of a merely instrumental perspective, but rather, in terms of a search for a wider purpose in our work, in society and in terms of a reflective professional life (Crookes 2003; Johnston 2003).

These questions in the contexts just mentioned are consistent with the idea that language teachers should have a well-worked-out set of views and values concerning their work and their practice as teachers, and this should go beyond a mere statement of methodological preferred practices (particularly, as the field is now supposed to be in a 'post-method' condition; cf. Shaw 2009). Professionals with plenty of experience (or who have been fortunate enough to have favorable conditions of employment in which reflection or articulation of beliefs were possible) likely already have some positions, or principles. Most language teachers, however, have probably never been presented with any formal orientation to a major area of relevance for developing such statements of values or beliefs, namely, the philosophy of education, as applied to our field. If pressed in this area, they might not have adequate sources to turn to. Nor have they been provided with opportunities to develop such views in any other way, even though experience reflected upon is one excellent source for developing one's ideas. While empirical research can offer useful suggestions about 'what works', the philosophy of education is the most obvious formal area that a teacher might turn to so as to obtain a sense of 'what is important', in one's professional life as a teacher of a second or foreign language.[1]

It is an open question as to what terms teachers generally use and, in particular, what targets they identify in their philosophies of teaching. The form and content of such statements has been discussed a little, both in the philosophical literature and in the professional development literatures (Van Scotter et al. 1979; Morris 1961; Schönwetter et al. 2002; Pratt 2005; see also the work of Breen and of Manghubhai as discussed in Crookes 2009). It is surely important to have far more understanding of this area, and the promotion of such work is the final goal of this paper. Even with that in hand, however, I hope teacher educators will restrain themselves from tightly specifying these statements in practice, as this could interfere with reflective thought and drive the development of a philosophy of teaching into a fill-in-the-blanks exercise.

The body of the paper is organized in terms of three major source areas for the development of philosophies of teaching and a research agenda. One way to develop a philosophy of teaching is to locate oneself within identifiable movements in what have been called the philosophies of schooling. Arguably, a second might be to focus on the philosophical dimensions of concepts used in (language) teaching, including systems of philosophy, or areas within the field of philosophy, most notably ethics. A third particularly fruitful area could be the identification of one's aims as a teacher using philosophical analyses. There may well be more, and this cannot as yet be known since we are only beginning to look at language teachers' philosophies or values systems empirically, as I will discuss in the final section of this paper.

2. Movements in Philosophy of Education

Perhaps determined (or desperate!) to start at the more practical end of what can admittedly be a very abstract areas, philosophers of education often introduce their domain in terms of movements in education that were, or are, relatively concrete manifestations of particular stances in the philosophy of education. Thus, Progressivism, Reconstructionism, Perennialism, and Essentialism are four 'philosophies of schooling' commonly identified by systematizers and presenters in the philosophy of education. The first of these is not only associated with the pre-eminent American philosopher of education, John Dewey (1916), but also goes back to the beginnings of modernism in Europe and to the beginnings of mass education at that time. From the 17th and 18th centuries, it is clearly associated with the educational ideas of Rousseau (1762) and the practices (and books) of

Pestallozi (1781), among others. The early versions promoted a conception of the child as fundamentally pure and having a natural orientation to growth and learning; they were intended to encourage teachers, parents, and society to turn away from authoritarian forms of instruction. They support one of Titone's (1968, 2000) two poles of language instruction (the functional, as opposed to the formal; cf. Musumeci 1997). As developed by Dewey and his followers in the early 20th century, both in the US and outside (e.g. China, briefly) this line acquired a strong commitment to democratic values and encouraged teachers to act and teach out of such a position. Schools were to prepare their students for an active civic life. School had the goal of preparing critically reflective and morally astute students. Some observers have found some of the central tenets of the progressive tradition within ELT or TESOL to also be visible under headings such as 'communicative approaches' (Crookes 2009; Howatt 1984; Lin and Luk 2002).

Reconstructionism was a movement that took Dewey's ideas and pushed them further in the direction of social change. Briefly prominent as a movement in education in the 1930s in the USA, its ideas were preserved in academic discussions of curriculum (e.g. Brameld 1971; Stanley 1992). Many of them are consistent with current developments in education generally and in language teaching associated with Freire's term 'critical pedagogy', including (for language specialists) most notably the areas of critical discourse analysis and critical literacy. They concern teaching in such a way as to foster active citizenship, and include the development of the ability to view ideas presented in written and spoken genres in a skeptical, challenging, or critical way.

Less explicitly a movement, more a recurrent position, philosophers of education have used the term 'perennialism' for the view that schools are places for the best values in a particular culture to be transmitted. This view was central to the Classics movement of the 19th century, and is also implicated in the teaching of the literatures of various languages. This might relate to language teaching in a variety of ways. In the past, it was sometimes suggested that the teaching of an internationally important foreign language (most obviously English) need not necessarily be associated with culture-specific values, and indeed countries such as China and Japan during their early contact with 'the West' sometimes manifested such a position. More recently, critics have asserted that teaching English unavoidably involves the teaching of or promotion of values associated with dominant trends in 'Western' society, though those are not regarded as reflecting the best values in world cultures by such critics.

Essentialism is the 'back to basics' position that encourages a supposedly simple and direct focus, in schools, on those skills that children 'need': basic skills of literacy or oracy, and a certain amount of supposedly factual content. 'It emphasizes the primacy of knowledge' (Strain 1971:12). The term was first coined by Demiashkevich in the 1930s, to signify a position that was opposed to that of progressivism (see Demiashkevich 1935). It is often directly justified by the supposed needs of commerce, industry, or employment – the things that schools should teach are those things that will enable school students to get a job. In this, it certainly connects with a very visible tradition in mass education that has manifested itself vigorously since the 19th century, and is clearly still prominent.

It might be said that this common set of four terms is a reification of matters that are not by any means equally visible in current education and language teaching. Yet with the possible exception of perennialism, these have been movements with their own organs, societies, and curricular publications, and they still represent positions that a teacher might take up and focus on. My hope is that, in developing their philosophies of teaching, language teachers might recognize certain practices, concepts, and orientations in language teaching within these historically located movements in the wider area of

education. If they do not, they are more likely to be slaves of the practices they find in the textbooks they are given; they are less likely to see themselves as historical actors working in or with one or more traditions that themselves have a history. If teachers do not see themselves as historically and socially located within trends in the development of mass education, they are more likely to be victims of a commonly encountered individualist and ahistorical conception of teaching that weakens the field as a whole.

3. Systems of Philosophy

As mentioned, these practical movements connect with systems, or 'schools', of philosophy – although there is not a one-to-one relationship between the philosophies of schooling and systems of philosophy, there are nevertheless strong conceptual connections between the philosophies of schooling and the three most commonly identified philosophical systems: idealism, realism, and pragmatism. The first of these systems is often associated with religious philosophies. The second has at its core a belief in the absolute tangibility of the real world, entirely independent of human conceptions of it. And the third, very much a newcomer in the long view of philosophers, tries to bridge the gap between these two, suggesting that things and knowledge are not known absolutely, but only in practice, through their use, and with a pragmatic limitation, then, on knowability (nevertheless quite without giving in to any highly skeptical position on knowledge). I think that many language teachers are actually pragmatists, in the common-place sense of the word; I believe that they would be glad to know that behind their willingness to try things out and see 'what works' is a philosophical sense that justifies and provides a firmer foundation for their reflective professional explorations of what works in the classroom, and their possible feeling that they hold their professional knowledge tentatively. At the same time, it should be recognized that many teachers do construct parts of their philosophies of teaching on religious values, and so aspects of idealism must play a part in this area. This is increasingly recognized in TESOL (Wong and Canagarajah 2009).

4. Categories in Philosophy (of Education)

A statement of a teacher's philosophy of (language) teaching is quite likely to include remarks that concern how that teacher thinks language teaching should go on. The field of applied linguistics clearly has the view that a large portion of how a professional language teacher teaches should be guided by (besides their personal values, or philosophies) the results of empirical investigations and draw on scientific theories of language learning and teaching. Approached from a philosophical point of view, this part of a philosophy of teaching calls forth questions about what we can know and how we can know it – that is, questions of epistemology. So turning the matter around, it behooves the careful language teaching professional to be familiar with some aspects of this major category in the field of philosophy, and a remark on this might appear in a formal statement of one's philosophy of teaching.

Epistemology is the domain of philosophy that concerns itself with the nature of knowledge; it develops, for example, theories of truth, and concerns itself with whether, how, and to what extent, we can be said to know something. Other key aspects of knowledge that regularly come up particularly when, as teachers, we are considering the basis for our actions include questions like whether truth is relative or absolute, the role of subjectivity in generating knowledge, or, to put it another way, the possibility that there could be truths that exist independent of humans.

A crucial subarea here concerns the validity or dependability of knowledge. Even if we do not wish to say that something is true absolutely, we may wish to advance it as a plausible, warranted assertion. A teacher may feel confident about a proposition because it holds together with other statements or positions that seem to be true. In that case, a coherentist theory of truth is being depended upon. Or, very commonly in the present era, we may simply assert that a statement is consistent with the facts; this remark in turn depends upon the plausibility of a correspondence theory of truth. Comparatively recently developed, a pragmatic theory of truth holds that a statement is warranted, in this respect, if it leads to workable, useful, and satisfactory correspondences. Note that these three sentences imply that this subarea can be conceptualized in relation to 'theories of truth'. Language teachers who wish to consult research for input into their developing philosophies of teaching may have to grapple with the possibility that researchers are operating with different theories of truth when they present their findings.

Besides epistemology, issues or questions in philosophy can to some extent be placed within two or three other large domains, metaphysics (and its subcategory ontology) and axiology. The first of these comes in if we ask 'what is the nature of a human being?'. And although it is rather an abstract question, what you think a human is, by nature, is an important question to answer, for a teacher. How we might teach, and our understanding of language learning, turns considerably upon whether we think that people (particularly students) are by nature social; essentially good, or not; having no essence, but rather existence, and so on.

Axiology, the third and final category of this conventional meta system, is perhaps the least familiar term, but it refers to what one values in life; it also concerns itself with what is beautiful or of value in other ways. Thus, it has two main sections: ethics and esthetics. I think it is self-evident that an understanding of ethics is important for language teachers, given our power relations with students, and our connection to issues of domination, emancipation, or oppression involved in teaching both dominant languages, or less commonly taught languages, or for that matter trying to preserve endangered languages, and so on (see the following section).

I doubt if many teachers who articulate a philosophy of teaching do so using these technical terms for the major categories of philosophical systems. However, those labels do refer to matters that many would consider important. At the least, having received a systematic exposure to material in this area and, preferably, having a systematic understanding of material that could aid the development of a philosophy of teaching ought to be desirable.

5. Ethics

Teachers are quite likely to find themselves in contact with professional ethics, either through encountering a statement of professional ethics,[2] or through specific prescriptions that their employing institution may make concerning professional conduct in a school, or increasingly, in our own professional literature reading about certain markedly ethically charged areas of practice, such as testing and assessment (cf. McNamara and Roever 2006; Shohamy 2004). In developing a philosophy of teaching, I believe teachers must first gain the perspective needed to grapple with such matters that comes from knowing that there *are* a variety of ethical systems, and that specialists (philosophers, at least) do not necessarily agree on how these are to be implemented. Language teachers should also be aware that there is an additional area, 'applied ethics', that studies what its name indeed suggests, namely the applications of systems of ethics to specific contexts and

problems. Merely being aware of these matters may not at first aid ethical decision making, but it should prevent teachers from being entirely at the (conceptual) mercy of the specific codes of practice that may be in play and of engaging in uninformed thinking about ethical matters (cf. Klinker and Hackman 2003). Awareness may lead to development in this important area through self-study and reflection.

This topic can be extended further. Particularly important is the idea that societies or society as a whole can be subject to ethical scrutiny, or to criticism that stems from adherence to an ethics. Because many language teachers are likely to come into contact with societies or cultures different from their own, or with representatives of others, they have more than the average chance to encounter challenges to their own sets of values. Teachers may have to think about how to engage with either individuals who have different value systems, or indeed how to engage with societies as a whole, a more tangible matter when one visits a society different to one's own and lives or works there for a while. Some form of citizenship, or active participation in a society different to that of one's birth, is increasingly possible even to sojourners; the literatures of our field now manifest examples of professionals (particularly in the area of TESOL) who have not been able to ignore the challenges to their own values faced both by long-term residence in a society with differing values or the challenges of teaching a language whose ascribed values are in conflict with those of the society in which it is taught (cf. Mirhosseini 2008). Thus, sociopolitical philosophy is an important domain for the process of constructing a philosophy of (language) teaching.

Indeed, there are quite fundamental issues that begin to arise when we start to think in these terms. *Should* a teacher manifest their values in their work (in their classrooms, their schools, and in their professional participation)? Some would say in answer, How could they not (at least to some extent)? And another response would be, What good is a professional life that doesn't operate according to values? It is in the nature of a profession and of professional activity that it must, by definition, be guided by values. (Thus conceptual analysis of the word 'profession' is probably part of the development of a philosophy of education.) Terms for a life in which a person is not able to manifest their values derive from critical and existentialist philosophy: alienated, inauthentic. But are there times when it is better not to? How can such a matter be subjected to an analysis or debate? Given that these are important matters, I have asserted that philosophical analyses of concepts such as compromise and resistance are necessary (Crookes 2009).

6. Aims of Language Teaching (and Teachers)

Perhaps the most important question for a language professional in development to ask is 'What am I trying to do here?', *if* the question is couched in more abstract or ideal terms than those suggested by most of our professional literature. (The latter would suggest mundane or unreflective, perhaps uncritical answers: teach the lesson efficiently, motivate my students, prepare them well for the test, and so on.) The literature of the philosophy of education, prominent authorities or classics in philosophy, and even national government curricular guidelines do tackle the 'aims of education', and there is every reason for language professionals to do so themselves. But to do so effectively, one might first want to know what the range of options is. One valuable taxonomy from the recent philosophy of education (Wringe 1988) has three parts: (1) aims that would confer benefits specifically upon the individual and favor his/her own ends and development; (2) aims concerned to preserve or bring about a desirable state of society; (3) aims to bring about such goals as the promotion of truth, rationality, excellence, and so on, which are

sometimes held to be intrinsically desirable or worthwhile. The first is where most of the emphasis is probably to be found if language teachers were asked, I suspect, given the prominence of individually oriented 'needs analysis' in dominant ideas about language curriculum design. Personally, I would like to see more answers that fell in the second category. And a little more rationality and excellence (see part 3 above) would not go amiss here at the beginning of the 21st century. My interest in these valuable aims as consistent with the higher aspirations of teacher professionalism leads me to hope that we could begin to find out whether language teachers do have such aims, that is, to propose an empirical research agenda in this area. My previous empirical research on the work conditions of language teachers (Crookes and Arakaki 1999; see also, e.g. Johnston 1997) and my views on the preparation of language teachers in connection with this (Crookes 1997) make me skeptical as to whether they generally do. So this leads to my final section, on empirical studies that pertain to this broad area.

7. Previous Empirical Research and a Research Agenda, or Researchable Questions

Empirical investigation of language teachers' philosophies of teaching, or of areas within it such as their values, beliefs, or aims, has barely begun. However, there is a range of studies of neighboring topics, the older ones of which concern themselves with teacher cognition and teacher knowledge (e.g. Woods 1996; Golombek 1998; and most recently Borg 2006[3]).[4]

More closely related to language teachers' values, there has been a line of work involving Mangubhai et al. (2004, 2005; on one hand) and Breen (1991, Breen et al. 2001; on the other) that addresses language teachers' beliefs primarily in terms of techniques and methods. Maghubhai, an established applied linguist, joined in on the pre-existing research program on mainstream teachers of Marland (1995), in Australia. Using interviews, these researchers studied the understandings of Communicative Language Teaching of seven teachers of LOTE (Languages Other Than English) in Australian high schools, with a focus on their use of ideas and practices related to communicative language teaching; they reported in detail on the understanding of one teacher of German as a foreign language. Breen and his team worked with 18 teachers, observing teachers, interviewing them about what they had done and had been observed to do in their classes (using video recordings to prompt recall and analysis), and then subjecting this material to an abstracting process to derive principles or 'concerns' related to (and manifesting in) their classroom practices.

Overall, the work of Breen, and that of Manghubhai and Marland, can be interpreted to suggest that (some, perhaps many) language teachers are operating without particular emphasis on higher aims. In these studies and earlier work by some of the same authors, when language teachers (or other teachers) do refer to aims, principles, and similar terms, they do not mention any higher aims of the kind mentioned in the previous section (for an extended summary and analysis, see Crookes 2009:224–32). Of course, it may be that these studies simply did not ask their respondent teachers the questions that a focus on philosophies of teaching per se would suggest. Equally likely, however, is the possibility that TESOL teacher preparation programs do not generally encourage teachers to think in these terms, and also that even if they did, the teachers' conditions of work would make it difficult for them to espouse such aims fully (see also Borg 2003).

This whole area does not have an extensive empirical base. A substantial proportion of the small number of publications available are themselves focused on one, or a small number of language teachers. So simple replication-type work, such as small studies of

one or a handful of language teachers in different (interestingly different) circumstances, would still be entirely appropriate and would potentially make a substantial contribution to the state of understanding we presently have. However, the most obvious or desirable line of research called for, given my analysis, would explicitly target concepts such as those identified in the studies of 'the aims of education' (such as Marples 1999, or that of Wringe mentioned earlier). These refer to concepts such as liberalism, citizenship, critical thinking, autonomy, national identity, self-determination, well-being, fairness (a fair education), moral seriousness, and social commitment, as they relate to language teaching, and as they are espoused, ignored, found irrelevant, or attempted but found frustrating, say, in the work of language teachers.

Most recently, an edited collection of essays and empirical studies (Wong and Canagarajah 2009), on TESOL specialists with explicitly Christian values (and perhaps aims), is bound to generate commentary and further research. The empirical part of Wong and Canagarajah (2009) suggests that some language teachers are indeed operating with aims beyond those of merely teaching the class well, and that their own values relate to personal and social improvement through language teaching, toward values that they associate with their own beliefs in particular forms of Christianity (and in the case of other teachers who are not the empirical focus of the book, with a view to societal change in directions associated with their progressive social and political views). It may be the case that these teachers formed their beliefs well ahead of taking teacher preparation courses, but if they are being encouraged to articulate their values as professionals, that might be better than being discouraged from doing so by teacher preparation programs that ignore such things or subordinate them entirely to a supposedly value-free version of applied linguistics research and practice.

At any rate, particularly because of the sensitive nature of the aspects of the topic that Wong and Canagarajah probe, a matter that was previously skirted in the main professional literatures of TESOL at least, it could well be the case that we are about to see a surge of not only interest but also publication in this area. In my recent work on the philosophy of education (Crookes 2009), I avoided a review of religious philosophy as a basis for the development of language teachers' values and beliefs, because I thought it would be both a very challenging area to write about and one large enough to require a book of its own. Reviewing current mainstream philosophy of education (which does indeed tend to be secular), sketching the history of values in language teaching, and dealing with some specialized topics such as compromise and resistance seemed quite enough of a challenge to me (and to my publisher). Now that the Christian dimension in values has been opened in our book-length literature (and post-9/11), we are also seeing some follow-up to Ozog's (1989) early study of Islamic values in language teaching (e.g. Mohd-Asraf 2005). Discussion of spiritual values not specific to religion can also be found in the literature of applied linguistics (e.g. Cutri 2000) and perhaps other religious philosophies will also be tapped in due course, and seem certain to form part of the research agenda for this broad area.[5]

This is not to suggest that the implications of more secular philosophies have by any means been exhausted. To take one example out of many possible: much of the literature on identity and teacher development assumes a role for the self-created self (while recognizing some social constraints) and it seems to have unacknowledged or unexplored foundations in the assumption that existence precedes essence. It is in that case heavily indebted to existentialism. Do most (or any!) language teachers realize this, I wonder?

8. Summary Conclusion

In this paper, I have provided a broadbrush explication of areas in the philosophy of education as applied to the concept of, and the development of, a language teacher's philosophy of teaching. The primary aim has been to indicate topics that those interested in developing a well-worked out philosophy of language teaching could turn to in order to inform their own practice. In addition, I have indicated the directions that inquiry (of which there is little as yet) could take in order to explore both secular and non-secularly based philosophies of teaching. And I emphasized above all the potential importance (if teaching so as to improve the society is to be undertaken) of clarifying language teachers' aims and, indeed, of finding out whether such aims exist above the more mundane ones of teaching the lesson or getting through the day.

Short Biography

Graham Crookes has worked in second language research and teacher education for twenty years, based in Hawai'i and doing workshops in a diverse range of locations, including Colombia, Kyrgyzstan, Korea, Denmark. He is presently particularly interested in both teachers' philosophies of teaching and the role of critical pedagogy in EFL. His most recent book, published with Cambridge, is *Values, Beliefs, and Philosophies in TESOL: Making a Statement.*

Notes

* Correspondence address: Prof. Graham Crookes, Department of Second Language Studies, University of Hawai'i at Manoa, 1890 East-West Road, Moore Hall 570, Honolulu, HI 96822, USA. E-mail: crookes@hawaii.edu

[1] Because of the importance of the cultural and international dimensions in language teaching, it might be wondered whether philosophy of education is too Anglocentric to do justice to the needs of, say, an Indonesian teacher of English or a Japanese teacher of German. It is true that international or comparative dimensions in the philosophy of education have been less prominent, but they do exist [see the special issue of *Comparative Education*, 2004a; Halstead and McLaughlin (2004:467) say this involves 'the examination of contexts where local philosophizing about education has developed (or is beginning to develop) either independently of western influence or through a complex process of interaction between western, indigenous and other cultural influences'; see also Gregorio and Gregorio 1979; Lee 1985; Chakrabarti 1993; Seth 1966].

[2] For example, the NAFSA statement of ethical principles (NAFSA 2009), the NEA code of ethics (1975), the AAUP statement on professional ethics (1961, 1981), and the American Association of School Administrators (1981). TESOL is notable by its absence, though see http://www.tesol-law.com/codeofethics.php for a draft statement in the *TESOL Law Journal*.

[3] Borg (2006:272) defines language teacher cognition as 'an inclusive term referring to the complex, practically-oriented, personalized, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts and beliefs that language teachers draw on in their work'.

[4] As ever, language specialists can turn to mainstream studies, though in this case there is perhaps less than what one might expect (of which Goodman 1988 is the most notable; see Crookes 2009:232–9).

[5] A diverse range of publications can be found stretching back probably as long as the establishment of the field of philosophy of education as a formal discipline that address religious philosophies, particularly those other than Christianity, as the basis for the philosophy of education or for the development of a philosophy of teaching (e.g. Chakrabarti 1993; Lee 1985; Seth 1966; Wisadavet 2003). This line is brought up to date by Halstead and McLaughlin (2004), though not with language or language teaching specifically in mind. Also in this area, note the possibility of a regional or national philosophy of education as a way of steering a course that is non-aligned though acknowledging Western influences (e.g. Gregorio and Gregorio 1979).

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