

English Language Teaching: Locating Faith in the Context of Local and Global Dynamics

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Abstract

This article aims to contribute to an understanding of the presence and outworking of Christian faith in the teaching and learning of English in the context of interconnected local and global dynamics. The pursuit is informed by conceptualizations of space as social text along with links to agency and identity. This frames the examination of classroom interaction data gathered in a community-based, volunteer-run, church-sponsored English as a Second Language program for adult newcomers to Canada. Classroom discourse and interaction are also considered with reference to interview comments made by program providers to gain insight into the significance they attach to their actions. This gives rise to the proposal that faith-informed dimensions of identity and ideological space at broad levels have implications for constructions of space in the localized dynamics of teaching and learning. The results and discussion make a case for the simultaneity of local and global ways of being in the world and an understanding of the construction of space not only as social text but, in this case, also spiritual text informed and animated by sacred text. The article concludes by considering how matters raised in the study might be relevant to Christian English language educators and researchers in other contexts.

Key words: English language teaching, church-based ESL, adult language education, space, agency, identity, classroom dynamics

The use of spatial metaphors can be found across a range of academic disciplines. In many cases terms such as *place*, *boundaries*, *borders*, *margins*, *location*, and *context* entail an understanding of space as produced by human activity in contrast to views of space as an empty container in which social life simply unfolds, (e.g., Canagarajah, 2005; Edwards & Usher, 2008; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Massey, 2005; Mizzi, 2013; Morgan, 2000; Wilson, Ek, & Douglas, 2014). In this article I wish to explore the space of English language teaching and learning and how faith values, including spiritual values from a Christian perspective, might come to bear on the understanding and structuring of this space. Morgan (2000) calls for an interpretation of space as social text. In his view, spaces are made in the living of our lives, a perspective that has implications for educational contexts. In this article I take the position that space can additionally

¹ I come to this study as a Christian researcher with a personal history of transnational migration.

be understood as spiritual text, also made in the living of our lives. Furthermore, I suggest that this perspective can likewise illuminate an understanding of educational spaces, not least, the space of English language teaching and learning.

In what follows, I begin by discussing the construct of *space* along with links to *agency* and *identity* before presenting and examining a set of interrelated excerpts of classroom interaction from a specific teaching and learning space, a community-based, volunteer-run, church-sponsored English as a Second Language (ESL) program for adult newcomers to Canada. I then consider the significance of this classroom interaction with reference to accounts of program providers to gain insight into the understandings they attach to their actions. In light of their comments, I suggest that faith-informed dimensions of identity and ideological space at broad levels have implications for constructions of space in the localized dynamics of teaching and learning. I elaborate by expanding on metaphors that emerge in the accounts of stakeholders and end with some thoughts on how the matters raised in this paper might be relevant to Christian English language teachers in other contexts.

Clarifying Constructs

Making Sense of Space

Conceptualizations of space, often held implicitly, are of great consequence for the way we order the world and position ourselves and others (Massey, 2005). In making the case for a spatial paradigm that transcends that of neutral arena or empty container, Massey (2005) advances three propositions. First, she proposes that space be understood as the product of interactions that range from the “intimately tiny” to “the immensity of the global” (p. 9); second, that it be recognized as a sphere constituted by “coexisting heterogeneity” (p. 9), that is, the co-existence of distinct trajectories, and third, that it be viewed as always under construction, “a simultaneity of stories-so-far” (p. 9). Such an understanding of space has implications not only for the production and reproduction of social relationships, but also for possibilities of inclusion and exclusion (Morgan, 2000). From this vantage point, space may further be understood as potentially enabling or constraining, “filled with power and ideology at all scales from the body to the global” (p. 281). Applied to educational spaces, it is an understanding that challenges the notion of classrooms as neutral containers for curriculum and pedagogy, considering instead how

“curriculum and pedagogy are moored and bounded together through particular enactments and gatherings of relations” (Edwards, Tracy, & Jordan, 2011, p. 273).

This is a position consistent with claims advanced by Cummins (2000, 2009), who asserts that pedagogical space in the classroom is created through the micro-interactions of participant stakeholders which cannot be understood apart from macro-interactions constitutive of the wider social space beyond. Furthermore, he holds that interactions between stakeholders at any level can be characterized in terms of power relations ranging along a continuum from coercive to collaborative. Whereas the former represents power exercised by dominant stakeholders to the disadvantage of those in less powerful positions, the latter represents collaborative power creation generated through joint interaction that amplifies the capacities and opportunities of participants. According to Cummins (2009), the micro-interaction between educators, students, and the communities they represent form an interpersonal space wherein knowledge acquisition and identity formation are negotiated (p. 263). Regardless of the external constraints that come to bear on pedagogical spaces within classrooms, Cummins asserts that educators always have some degree of choice in how they orchestrate classroom interactions and that the choice represents pedagogical opportunity as well as ethical responsibility (p. 262).

Agency

This raises the question of agency. Seen from a socio-dynamic paradigm, agency may be understood as a person’s capacity to act within the possibilities afforded by surrounding social structures (van Lier, 2008) while not necessarily being determined by them (Gao, 2007; Kristjánsson, 2013a).

More specifically,

Agency refers to people’s ability to make choices, take control, self-regulate, and thereby pursue their goals... Agency can also enable people to actively resist certain behaviors, practices, or positionings, sometimes leading to oppositional stances and behaviors leading to other identities. (Duff, 2012, p. 417)

Put differently, agency can be understood as a complex dynamic system in which people interact with their environments in an ongoing co-constitutive relationship (Mercer, 2011). As such, in addition to action or performance, agency includes the dynamics of meaning and interpretation, encompassing the ability to ascribe relevance and significance to things and events, including agentive behaviour itself (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Miller, 2010; van Lier, 2008; Yang, 2013). It

can thus be understood as a dynamic property constructed through participation in activity, accounting also for the diversity of relevance and significance attributed to participation in the same activity by different individuals (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 239). From this vantage point, in the most succinct of terms, agency can be summed up as *meaningful* action (Arnold & Murphey, 2013).

At the centre of any discussion of meaningful action in the classroom lies the ethical dimension of teacher choices noted earlier. Cummins (2009), like others (e.g., Hafernik, Messerschmitt, & Vandrick, 2002), uses the term to encompass elements that can more closely be defined by distinguishing between ethics and morality. As set forth by Johnston (2003), ethics pertains to the codified standards and rules governing professional conduct, while morality involves personal values and beliefs that cannot be regulated by institutions, but play a significant role in teaching and are inextricably linked to teacher identity (p. 11). Johnston further observes that religious persuasions are among the most profoundly significant parts of identity for many people and, not uncommonly, form the foundation for any discussion of values in language teaching (p. 112). This gives rise to his claim that an understanding of the complex moral space of ELT is incomplete without some consideration of how such foundational beliefs might come to bear on the practices of educators.

Johnston is not alone in his position. Christian scholars have, for centuries, explored the connection between Christian faith and education (Wong, 2014). In the professional conversations of mainstream ELT, during the past several decades, discussions of spirituality and religion, once rare, have begun to emerge with increasing frequency. These include diverse published perspectives on the interface of ELT and Christian faith (e.g., Edge, 1996, 1996-1997; 2003; Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2003; Phillipson, 1992; Purgason, 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2007; Stevick, 1990, 1996-1997; Wong & Canagarajah, 2009), along with the gradual emergence of empirical studies and discussion of potential research directions encompassing Christian faith (e.g., Baurain, 2015; Han, 2009; Han & Varghese 2019; Varghese & Johnston, 2007; Wong, Kristjánsson, & Dörnyei, 2013; Wong & Mahboob, 2018), and a recent articulate call for the establishment of a subfield in applied linguistics that focuses on religion and language teaching and learning (Han, 2018). One focal point in this discussion is the role of faith in Christian teachers' understanding of their identity (e.g., Pasquale, 2013; Wang-McGrath, 2013; Wong, 2009, 2013) and the implications this might have for teaching as well as student experience in

the complex socio-dynamic relations between stakeholder identities, motivation, and agency in classroom interaction (Baurain, 2013; Chan, 2013; Ding, 2013; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Kim, 2019; Kristjánsson, 2013a, 2018; Kubanyiova, 2013; Lessard-Clouston, 2013; Smith, 2013; Snow, 2013).

Identity

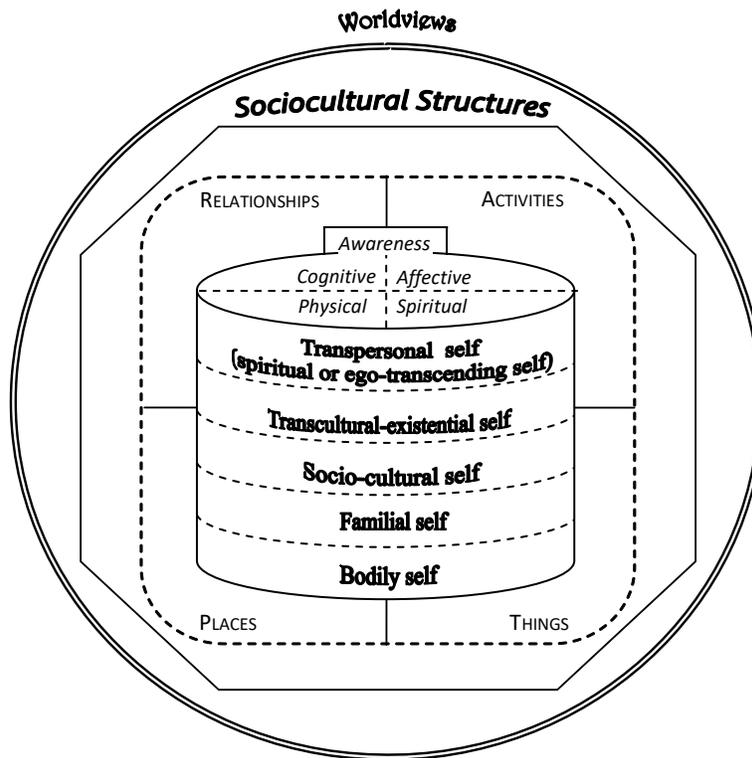
Norton (2000) describes identity as “how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (p. 5). The dynamic and complex nature of interrelationships coming to bear on the spaces of ELT can be helpfully illuminated further with reference to the work of Ishiyama (1995a), who sees human interaction as motivated by a need for self-validation. Within this paradigm, self-validation is the “affirmation of one’s sense of self, purpose in life, and meaningful personal existence in a given sociocultural context” (Ishiyama & Kitayama, 1994, p. 168), a process often mediated in and through language (Ishiyama, 1995b). Self, in this view, is represented as a multidimensional construct consisting of five elements: physical, or *bodily self* (the body and physical aspects of being), *familial self* (family roles and relationships), *sociocultural self* (social and cultural roles and relationships outside the family context), *transcultural-existential self* (the existential aspect of self capable of relating to others at a level beyond the restrictions of sociocultural norms or externally imposed values), and *transpersonal self* (the spiritual or ego-transcending aspect of self) (Ishiyama, 1995a). These interrelated dimensions are co-occurring, fluid, and holistic.

I also suggest that the way in which an individual personally experiences or assigns significance to a particular dimension of self at any given time will draw on *physical*, *cognitive*, *affective*, and/or *spiritual* awarenesses and capacities (Kristjánsson, 2010, 2013a). From this perspective, identities are formed and validated or invalidated around the five basic dimensions of self in various contexts, or spaces, of human existence. These interactive spheres of existence can be conceptualized in terms of four overlapping domains: interpersonal *relationships*, *activities*, symbolic and practical objects or *things*, and *places* or landmarks (Ishiyama, 1995a). In my understanding (Kristjánsson, 2010), the domains do not exist in a vacuum, but are located within a constellation of interrelated *sociocultural structures* such as government, educational institutions, organized religion, and kinship structures, to name a few. They encompass relations

of power and are themselves situated in broader orientations toward the world which include, but are not limited to, cultural and ideological frames, represented by the term *worldviews*.

Worldviews come to bear on how all aspects are understood and interpreted in constructing identities for self and positioning others at any given point in time and space. This is depicted in the diagram below of multidimensional identity, situated in the interrelationships of multiple dynamic interconnected systems (Kristjánsson, 2013a).

Figure 1. *Situated Multidimensional Identity* (Kristjánsson, 2013a, p. 13)



Pedagogical and Interpersonal Space: Glimpses of Classroom (Inter)Action

The Practices of Teaching and Learning

Kubanyiova (2013) has observed that one of the most notable features of research on Christian educators is “an almost exclusive empirical focus on ‘narrated’ as opposed to ‘enacted’ identities” (p. 90) She urges researchers to move beyond reliance on anecdotal evidence and incorporate richer descriptions by examining teachers’ practices, evidenced through classroom discourse patterns and general interactions with students, among other things (p. 90). With this injunction in mind, I would like to consider two sets of classroom interaction, drawing

substantially on the words of participants so that their voices are not obscured by my own. The excerpts to be examined occurred at a three-week interval in the same class and are taken from a study conducted in a volunteer-run, church-based language program for adults in Canada (Kristjánsson, 2013a).

An important feature of the program was an activity known as “What did you do on the weekend?” which took place during the first part of the first class each week and appeared regularly in my video-recordings of classroom interaction. During this activity, students at all levels were given an opportunity to talk about something they had done or experienced over the weekend and it was not uncommon for classes to spend up to 90 minutes, or 25% of weekly class time, engaged in this exercise. While these sessions were often characterized by accounts of routine occurrences and lighthearted moments of teasing and joking, there were also times when students chose to disclose matters that were serious in nature and of deep personal significance.

Such an instance occurred one winter morning in an intermediate class of female students comprised of immigrant women and mothers of visa students, many alone with their children in Canada. On this day, 14 Taiwanese and Korean women were present along with the female Canadian born teacher, herself the daughter of European immigrants. The class began with a Taiwanese student describing the death of a 33-year-old cousin from cancer. The next student told of her aging father’s baptism in a hospital in Taiwan. A third student spoke of her husband’s return to Korea for another three months and her son’s inconsolable grief. The fourth student, Juling, a Taiwanese woman, began by saying that she had not been well over the weekend, linking her condition to interrelated physical and emotional causes. When the teacher attributed this to missing her husband, who was in Taiwan, Juling rejected the explanation. In her view, it was due to lack of good friends and her recourse had been to pray.

Week 1:1

Juling: Last week I’m very sad because I feel uncomfortable. I have some runny nose...and cough and I feel very lonely.

Teacher: Oh, you miss your husband

Juling: No, because I came to here and haven’t good friend [fights tears] and so I pray.

Amid offers of support and friendship from others in the class, Juling told how she had called an immigrant acquaintance who had also initially experienced physical illness in Canada which she linked to loneliness.

Week 1:2

Juling: I called a friend. I'm very lonely [wipes a tear from one eye]. So she introduced a woman, when she immigrate to here, she hardly get disease.

Seeking to better understand what Juling was saying, the teacher sought clarification while other students offered nonverbal support.

Week 1:3

Teacher: She hardly?

Juling: Yeah, because

Teacher: Just a minute. Say that again. She hardly what?

Juling: She hardly get disease [wipes a tear from the other eye]. [Li Fen comes with Kleenex, puts it in her hand as she talks and hugs her from behind while Juling continues talking with T.]

Teacher: She gets the disease or she hardly does?

Juling: Yes

Teacher: That means she never does? She's usually healthy?

Juling: Yes

Teacher: Okay

Juling continued. Now that the acquaintance had friends, this was no longer a problem. She reported that the woman had given her advice on how to make friends, but that she felt she still did not know what to do and so she had prayed once again.

Week 1:4

Juling: She say she has the same experience with me.

Teacher: So you always get, like, ah, colds? Do you usually get colds and allergies? Is that what you have?

Juling: [Nods and wipes eyes with Kleenex] The friend, she told me many experience move here. And now she is very exciting in her life so she just talk me much about how to get friends in here.

Teacher: That was good.

Juling: But I don't know [how to get friends]. I prayed. God answer me.

Juling went on to tell how she had subsequently received phone calls from several friends who lived at a distance and that neighbors had also dropped by for a visit. When the teacher echoed Juling's earlier assertion that it was an answer to her prayer, she agreed, reiterating her view of the impetus for the chain of events.

Week 1:5

- Juling: Because I prayed, “God, I’m very lonely” and he [gestures to self] me.
Teacher: Yeah, he brought you some hope.
Juling: [Nods head]
Teacher: Good.
-

The teacher then extended the conversation by observing that everyone, including herself, faced loneliness at times. She went on elaborate, broadening the conversation by elevating Juling’s account from an individual experience to one shared by many. While others in the class continued to show empathy and support for Juling, the teacher highlighted the group’s shared need of each other.

Week 1:6

- Teacher: Women need each other. We need to talk, and I know for lots of you it must be very hard... [Juling wipes eyes] That’s wonderful. God answered your prayer. [Juling continues to wipe eyes. Jia Li wipes the corners of her eyes. Jinhee puts an arm around Juling.]
Mi-Hye: You have very good friends here. [Li Fen walks over with more Kleenex and pats Juling comfortingly on the shoulders]
Teacher: You know that we all care about you.
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At this point Jinhee, a Korean student, spoke up with the teacher and another Korean student joining in, all three deploying humor to facilitate a serious discussion of loneliness and depression:

Week 1:7

- Jinhee: Early morning I receive a call from my husband. Suddenly, why I cried? I don’t know.
Teacher: Because you missed him! [General Laughter]
Jinhee: I’m not missing him. Just a little bit. [General laughter; Jinhee laughs]
Teacher: [Acts as if phoning] But all of a sudden you hear his voice and then you really miss him!
Mi-Hye: My husband always with me, but I sometimes will cry too. [General laughter]
Yeah. Not husband! [General laughter] ...
Jinhee: Sometimes my feeling is low. I am crying. My husband really worry about me. He say, “Why you crying?” So I answer
Mi-Hye: “I need you” [Much general laughter]
Teacher: “I need you!” [More general laughter]
Mi-Hye: “Right now.”
Teacher: Yeah, “Right now! Come home!”

Jinhee: [Mimics her husband] “I think that you catch some cold?” I, “Yes,” but I’m not catch cold. [laughs]
Teacher: You just said you did. ...

Jinhee finished her remarks by stating that when in Canada, unlike in Korea, she too sometimes experienced the feelings described by Juling. The teacher then turned to Juling and affirmed her once more for making the disclosure, noting the benefit of becoming aware that she wasn’t alone in this experience. Two other students added their thoughts, picking up on the theme of strength implied by Jinhee’s account of allowing her husband to think she had a cold. They also returned to the theme of loneliness and the potential for greater strength in mutual support, interaction facilitated by the teacher.

Week 1:8

Yu-Jeong: Now I think it is time to test myself, to [be] strong.
Teacher: Oh yeah...it’s a testing time.
Various: Yeah
Yu-Jeong: [To Juling] Everyone is difficult, are difficult, live here.
Yun Jin: You have to stand alone.
Teacher: And I remember, Mi-Hye, when you were in my class at first. You said, “I always have a headache [general laughter] to think about all these words.”
Mi-Hye: [Nods head] Yeah
Teacher: ...there are so many adjustments.
Yu-Jeong: ...Because we feel alone, lonely. Try to share, share together. [Gestures to include class]

Juling responded to Yu-Jeong’s comment by elaborating further on the cause of her loneliness, missing the Lunar New Year celebration in Taiwan.

Week 1:9

Juling: In Taiwan, there Lunar New Year. The company have a special dinner with the staff. Every year I have this special dinner, but this year I haven’t.

This sparked an exchange, initiated by Jinhee and supported by the teacher, regarding special holidays and the loneliness people feel when separated from loved ones at such times. At the end, the teacher again thanked Juling for her contribution. Juling responded with an apology, an action met with protests from the teacher and other students.

Week 1:10

Teacher: Don't be sorry!
Various: Don't be sorry!
Jinhee Don't be sorry [Gestures with hand to indicate "No"]
Teacher: No, it's very good. ...you feel better when you talk about it and find out that others feel the same thing.

Yalin, a Taiwanese student, then offered to help Juling make contact with other Chinese in the church community to which she belonged. This was followed by more comments of affirmation and support, and a final observation by Jinhee that listening to Juling's story had caused those in the class to feel closer. The teacher agreed, bringing this part of the activity to an end.

However, that was not the end of Juling's story. Three weeks later the mood was very different during the "What did you do on the weekend?" activity as students talked about their weekends in small groups. Juling had been busy. Among other things, that weekend an art club had been started in her home, facilitated by Yalin, who had arranged for an art teacher through her contacts. A number of women in the English class had been there with their children and were learning to draw. After a time of animated group interaction, the teacher called the class together and each student took a turn reporting on the activities of another person in their group. Juling's group had the floor and Jinhee was attempting give the class a report of Juling's weekend, but with such enthusiastic support from Yu-Jeong, a generally more proficient speaker of English, that Jinhee's opportunity to speak was being limited. The teacher stepped in, both complimenting Yu-Jeong on her English language ability and creating space for Jinhee, whose attention had been drawn to Yu-Jeong's word choice.

Week 3:1

Yu-Jeong: Teacher taught her...to draw a picture.
Teacher: Oh.
Jinhee: [To Juling] Draw a picture?
Yu-Jeong: Yeah
Teacher: Okay, okay, okay. This is what I want. I want Jinhee to try to explain, because you're very good, Yu-Jeong. [General laughter] You're very good, but I want Jinhee to try [More laughter]. [To Jinhee] Then you get better! [Continued laughter]
Jinhee: Anyway Juling and her friend, four ladies
Teacher: Yes, there's four ladies
Jinhee: came to Juling's house. And then their teacher is a man, teach, taught them take a picture.

The teacher, noting Jinhee's choice of "take" over "draw", probed this aspect further in a brief exchange.

Week 3:2

Teacher: Draw a picture?
Yu-Jeong: Draw a picture.
Jinhee: Draw a picture!
Teacher: What's take a picture? What's take a picture?
Students: [Make motions of taking a picture with a camera or point to the video camera]
Teacher: Camera, yeah.

Jinhee then concluded her account, followed by another brief exchange in which the teacher complimented her on her language use and others verified their understanding of the related verb tense:

Week 3:3

Jinhee: Anyway, she had a good time! [General laughter]
Teacher: That's good. You did a good, a good job. Very good.
Jinhee: Thank you
Various: [Echo] taught
Teacher: Taught, t-a-u-g-h-t [Spells word]
Jinhee: Past?
Teacher: Teaching. Past tense.

Following a few more exchanges in which the teacher asked Juling more about the art club, Juling emphatically stated that the pictures drawn by participants' children were beautiful, and at the teacher's request, those involved promised to bring the drawings next class for others to see. The discussion continued with Yu-Jeong reiterating Juling's busyness, further noting that she and Juling had also gone to the local swimming pool together on the weekend.

Soon after it was Juling's turn to recount another student's weekend experience. As she searched for words to begin, the report turned into a co-constructed account in which those present deliberately played with language, simultaneously joking and expressing an important message about themselves and their appreciation for each other.

Week 3:4

Juling: Li Fen's family last Saturday went to a group of [makes circular motion with hands searching for words], went to a friend [makes gestures, still searching for words], a group of [makes a face, still searching for words]

Teacher: Right
Li Fen: Beautiful women cooking meeting.
Juling: Cooking meeting
Teacher: A? A?
Juling: Beautiful women cooking, but [General laughter]
Teacher: Beautiful women?
Juling: Cooking meeting

Admittedly confused, the teacher sought clarification, which led to another collaboratively constructed explanation:

Week 3:5

Teacher: Okay, hold on. I'm confused here. [General laughter] Li Fen, you went to somebody's house?
Juling: Yes
Teacher: And they taught you how to cook there?
Li Fen: Yeah
Teacher: A Canadian home?
Li Fen: No. Chinese.
Teacher: A Chinese home.
Juling: Because Chinese Lunar, Autumn Moon Festival, we have special cookies... so a member taught them how to make special cookies.

This prompted a request from students, repeated by the teacher, that samples of the “special cookies” be brought next class along with the pictures. Li Fen promised she would try. Suddenly Jinhee made a pivotal and emphatic statement, drawing attention to what she considered to be an underappreciated but highly significant point, the description of the Asian women who had been in attendance. This was immediately reiterated by Li Fen and taken up by the teacher:

Week 3:6

Jinhee: What Li Fen say is, it is important thing, is the group is BEAUTIFUL LADIES GROUP
Various: Oh! ...
Li Fen: All women beautiful!
Teacher: Ooohhh! [Much laughter]
Li Fen: Beautiful women cooking meeting.
Teacher: Oh, all beautiful women were there. [Much laughter] Of course, look at how beautiful Li Fen is.

At this, Juling added her own observation, and with understanding enhanced by recent acts of friendship, re-directed the appraisal to those present. Her comment was underscored by Li Fen and taken up by the teacher. It was also enthusiastically echoed by others and extended to the teacher in a moment of palpable appreciation for the deeper significance of what was being said.

Week 3:7

Juling: We all, the class, we all beautiful [Gestures to include group – much laughter from others]
Li Fen: [Also gestures inclusively] all beautiful
Teacher: [Gestures to include everyone] Oh, we're all beautiful! [Much laughter]
Various: [Echo] All beautiful
Yu-Jeong: Beautiful teacher

And so the “What did you do on the weekend?” activity continued.

The Local Dynamics of Classroom Space: A Closer Look

How might we make sense of the local dynamics of interpersonal and pedagogic space created by the “What did you do on the weekend?” activity? While the kind of interaction evidenced above cannot be predicted, much less prescribed, it can be seen to arise in the context of certain practices on the part of the teacher. For example, the teacher’s engagement with students is characterized by a focus that privileges attention to meaning over language form (e.g., Week 1:3), although not to the exclusion of attention to form (e.g., Week 3:2; 3:3); a supportive power-sharing stance that not only creates opportunities for students to share matters of interest (Week 1:6), but facilitates their initiatives (e.g., Week 1:8); and the support and deployment of humor that facilitates sensitive discussions and promotes student well-being (e.g., Week 1:7; Week 3:6). It also accommodates the inclusion of spiritual dimensions of experience as a matter of course in the rhythm of classroom interaction (Week 1:4, 1:5, 1:6).

Overall, the suite of instructional practices represented in the excerpts combine to demonstrate a subordination of teacher/student identities to “full person” identities. This can be viewed as a meta-practice that enables the creation of pedagogic space at the interface of lived experience and language learning, with the latter subordinated to, and animated by, the former. The effect is that students are positioned as people who not only have matters of interest to share but also have the right to speak, irrespective of English language proficiency. As the interaction plays out, validating responses from the teacher and others affirm them in this capacity. In short,

teacher agency is directed at creating an inviting interpersonal and pedagogic space for language learning that organically engages the realities of significance to students.

Classroom Discourse Patterns

What are those realities and what is the response of students? In the classroom excerpts examined here, participant contributions consist of personal stories and comments related to the experience of being newcomers to Canada—perceptions and understandings of self in reference to a new place and new ways of being. It is within the multifaceted dynamics of the shared migration story that identity positions are constructed at the micro level by naming or implication in the give and take of discursive agency. This includes instances where positions are claimed (e.g., friendless newcomer), contested (e.g., lonely wife), re-negotiated (e.g., newcomer with good friends), transformed (e.g., strong women), extended (e.g., mutually supportive women), and redefined (e.g., quick-witted conversationalists, enterprising expatriates, beautiful women) among others. Evaluative comments indicate both instances of invalidation (e.g., “I...haven’t good friend”) and validation (e.g., “It is very good that you shared this...”), with comments in the latter category predominant and evidenced not only in the interaction between the teacher and students, but also between students (e.g., “You have very good friends here.” “...the class, we all beautiful.”), and even extended from student to teacher (e.g., “beautiful teacher”).

While these exchanges occur in the dynamic outworking of teacher and student identity roles linked to dimensions of *sociocultural self* and encompass demonstrations and descriptions of social agency, the accounts of stakeholders are not limited to the confines of those identity roles, nor for that matter, social agency. A closer look indicates that participant accounts represent variegated subjectivities constructed by foregrounding different aspects of first person awareness. This can be seen, for example, in the development of Juling’s account. When the teacher seeks to define her condition of unwellness in terms of *familial self* and positions her as “lonely wife”, Juling resists. Instead, she claims the identity of “friendless newcomer”, an appeal to her sense of *sociocultural self*. She constructs this subject position with reference to three types of awareness: *physical* (cough, runny nose), *affective* (very sad, very lonely), and *cognitive* (I don’t know [how to get friends]). When her consultation with acquaintances, an exercise of social agency, falls short of alleviating the sense of invalidated sociocultural self, she decides to pray, by her own account engaging a Transcendent Other. This recourse, arguably an exercise of

spiritual agency, invokes the dimension of transpersonal self and positions her as someone who claims a spiritual identity, in this case the action of prayer enacting an understanding of relationship with that Transcendent Other. Her sense of transpersonal self is validated when she perceives her prayer to be answered (“God answer me”). It is a *spiritual* awareness that provides the lens through which she views and makes sense of subsequent phone calls from friends and an unexpected visit from neighbours, events which provide some longed-for validation of sociocultural self. The teacher, for her part, responds affirmingly, aligning herself with Juling’s view that God answered her prayer, and in so doing, enacting a posture of openness towards spiritually informed subjectivities and claims to spiritual identity in the classroom.

Overall, an analysis of classroom interaction at the micro level of discourse suggests that the significance of personal stories and related interaction goes beyond the immediate details and circumstances of a reported occurrence, signaling also deeper aspects of human experience and related perceptions of validation or lack thereof. A review of classroom discourse with primary reference to the broader categories of self and related validation domains anchored in an understanding of the dynamics of situated multidimensional identity demonstrates this more fully, providing an overall picture of links between discursive agency and foundational dimensions of self invoked in identity construction. Table 1 illustrates this connection, drawing on representative excerpts of classroom discourse thematically analyzed with reference to categories pertaining to dimensions of self and validation domains and presented in order of occurrence.

The profile represented in Table 1 shows, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the interaction emerging in the “What did you do on the weekend?” activity encompasses the construction of identity positions related primarily to the dimension of *sociocultural* self. Nevertheless, appeals are also made to *transpersonal*, *transcultural*, *familial*, and *bodily* aspects of self. Furthermore, in the “Validation Domains” category, the predominant representation of *relationships* underscores the importance of interpersonal relationships as a source of validation at this time in students’ lives. While the interaction from Week 1 includes student disclosures of spatially oriented invalidation linked to limited access to meaningful relationships and activities arising from relocation to Canada, these are coupled with validating responses made by the teacher and other students, creating a spatially oriented distinction between inside and outside the class. In contrast, the interaction of Week 3 is characterized entirely of validating remarks and related

identity construction. Although these expressions still have much to do with interpersonal relationships, other domains have increased prominence, including *activities* (art club activities, baking), *physical things* (drawings, special cookies, beautiful Asian bodies) and *symbolic things* (English proficiency/use, holiday celebration, beauty of character). All of these are linked to *place*, encompassing aspects of validating interpersonal interaction in Canada that emerge, in part, due to demonstrations of social agency outside of class in follow-up to the in-class discussions of Week 1.

Table 1. *Participant Comments, Dimensions, and Validation Domains*

	Participant Comments	Dimension of Self	Validation Domain
Week 1	I'm very sad.... I feel uncomfortable...I feel very lonely	Sociocultural self (invalidated)	Relationships (Place: Community/Canada)
	I... haven't good friend		
	I prayed, "God I am very lonely." He brought you some hope. Good.	Transpersonal (spiritual) self (validated)	Relationships
	We all do [have lonely days]	Transcultural-existential self (validated)*	Relationships (Place: Everywhere/Canada/ESL Class)
	Women need each other		
	You have very good friends here.	Sociocultural self (validated)	Relationships (Place: ESL Class/Canada)
	We all care (about you).		
	I cried	Familial self (under validated)	Relationships (Place: Canada)
	You missed him [husband]		
	I am not missing him. Just a little bit.		
	Every year I have this special dinner [Lunar New Year celebration]	Sociocultural self (invalidated)	Activity/Symbolic Thing (Place: Canada)
	This year I haven't [special dinner]		
[sharing with class] It is very good.	Sociocultural self (validated)	Relationships (Place: ESL Class/Canada)	
You feel better when you talk about it			
Week 3	That's good. You did a good, a good job [English language use].	Sociocultural self (validated)	Symbolic Thing (Place: Class/Canada)
	Juling last weekend always busy.	Sociocultural self (validated)	Relationships/Activities (Place: Juling's home/Community/Canada)
	it is important thing, is the group is BEAUTIFUL LADIES GROUP	Bodily self (validated)	Literal/Symbolic Thing [Asian Body/Beauty] (Place: Community/Canada)
	We all, the class, we all beautiful	Existential self (validated)	Relationships (Place: ESL Class/Canada)

*Here the statement that all women have lonely days signals empathy and thus serves as a means of validating Juling.

Summary of Local Dynamics of Classroom Space

How might we succinctly characterize the “What did you do on the weekend?” activity? Does it provide space for listening and speaking practice? negotiation of meaning with strategic attention to form? development of communicative competence? meaningful conversation? support, care, and validation of members of the learning community? support, care, and validation of newcomers to Canada? social engagement and friendship building? spiritual engagement? Some of the above? All of the above? Something else?

The answer to these questions depends greatly on how one makes sense of classroom space and related interactions. The “What did you do on the weekend?” activity, by its design, positions learners as social subjects rather than as subjects of language learning, inviting them to create meanings around the realities and subject positions of their choice rather than presenting them with pre-determined social realities around which to practice language. While it is possible for students to experience such an activity as language practice only, the responses seen here suggest that those involved view the interaction as more than a pedagogic exercise. This is evidenced in the scope and non-superficial quality of the multi-participant communication as well as the out-of-class follow-up to declarations of friendship and offers of support. The expressions of agency, both in and out of class, effect desirable changes in the lived experience of participants which in turn become the basis for ongoing discussion and language learning. Pedagogic space in this classroom thus emerges as a welcoming place for the simultaneous and dynamic outworking of “stories-so-far” (Massey, 2005), stories discursively rendered in English in successful appropriation of the language of power beyond the classroom. This invites a closer look at the macro-level conditions in which these micro-level interactions arise.

Broader Influences on Classroom Dynamics

The accounts told during “What did you do on the weekend?” are individual variations of the broader story of migration to Canada that has emerged as part of larger interconnected stories including those pertaining to political, economic, educational, religious, and familial systems and structures at multiple levels (e.g., Aye & Guerin, 2001; Goh-Grapes, 2009; Han 2009, Ley & Tse, 2013; Noels & Barry, 2006). While it is beyond the scope of this discussion to explore a full range of representative connections in detail, it is helpful to take a closer look at institutional

perspectives related to the church-sponsored ESL program as well as views brought to the practice of language teaching by program providers.

Faiths

To facilitate the discussion at hand, I wish to use the term *faith* and, following the late Earl Stevick (2013), I begin with the understanding that

an article of faith is simply one or another of the deepest of those guiding assumptions that a person works from. It may be on a spiritual topic, but it doesn't have to be. Some articles of faith are consciously arrived at and held, but others arise from less conscious sources. Many articles of faith are parts of what the holder of the article thinks of as "just plain common sense." (p. 64)

When Stevick began his teaching career in the late 1940s, the dominant "faith" in the Western world conceived of humans as beings governed by the mechanics of a complex body system (Bloomfield, 1933). This was a view rooted in Descartes' 17th century division of nature into two distinct realms—the mental or experiential on one hand and the physical or material on the other. It was an arrangement that, in effect, parceled out the conscious mind along with soul and spirit to religion and the material world to science leading to the dominance of materialistic behaviourism in academia (Gross & Simmons 2009; Kristjánsson, 2013b). The characterization of humans as little more than bundles of biological complexity left its mark on language learning in the form of perspectives and practices that conceptualized learning as habit formation (Fries, 1945; Skinner, 1957; Stevick, 2013).

In North America, this perspective of language and learning was challenged and shown to be inadequate, most famously by Noam Chomsky (1959), leading to a guiding faith that saw humans not only as biological, but more importantly, as cognitive beings (Chomsky, 1965; Corder, 1967; Selinker, 1972). The implications for language learning were significant (Larsen-Freeman, 2007), undergirding what has until recently in the West been seen as the dominant paradigm in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (Atkinson, 2011a), a position characterized by "psychologically oriented theories that construe knowledge as residing in the mind, assume that learning is an individual accomplishment, and posit that mind achieves learning through environmental stimuli" (Ortega, 2011, p. 168). However, with the passage of time, limitations related to this position also began to emerge (Firth & Wagner, 1997; Larsen-Freeman, 2007), leading to another paradigm shift (Block, 2003), this one highlighting the importance of

understanding language learners as social beings (e.g., Gao, 2010; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). From this perspective, learning is viewed as social accomplishment, knowledge and learning are socially distributed, have social histories, and are only possible through social interaction (Ortega, 2011, p. 168).

While this latter understanding has had increasingly noticeable effects on theoretical discussions and related research (Atkinson, 2011b; Lafford, 2007; Zuengler & Miller, 2006), it can be argued that the influence is less evident in generally held assumptions about language learning and related classroom practices. It is a point made by Han (2009), who documents the trajectory of a Chinese immigrant couple as they adjusted to Canadian society, including learning English, through the support received in a Chinese-Canadian church community. Although Han's article does not mention church-sponsored ESL classes, her account of support, genuine care for, and inclusion of newcomers is consistent with demonstrations in the ESL program considered here. In her discussion, Han (2009) challenges the underlying assumption—the cognitive faith—that has dominated the field of language learning in many quarters, stating: “The commonsense assumption that language learning...should be examined and addressed as a purely linguistic matter has dominated the field of applied linguistics and...is an ideological position. It is a consequential choice...to problematize and challenge this assumption” (p. 663). Her call is for greater understanding and related action in light of the complex social dynamics in which language is learned and used. She goes on to assert that the responsibility for societal inclusion does not rest solely with newcomers, and that much can be learned from the practices of institutional inclusion found in “alternative spaces” (p. 665), a term she applies to ethnic minority church communities. This perspective can also be helpfully applied to church-based language programs (Han & Varghese, 2019), and I suggest that the volunteer-run church-sponsored program considered here can be characterized as an alternative language learning space. Furthermore, given the interconnectedness of micro-level agentive actions and macro-level ideological structures (Cummins, 2000; Kristjánsson, 2013a; Massey, 2005), it seems that additional insights stand to be gained by examining the broader perspectives that inform the dynamics of this space.

Program Provider Perspectives

Whereas formal language programs have been charged with failing to accommodate important aspects of learner identity (Morgan, 2002), the presence and implementation of the “What did you do on the weekend?” activity suggests a different perspective in this community-based church-sponsored program. When asked what the church hoped to accomplish by offering an ESL program, the senior pastor cast the institution as an agent of social change responsible for taking measures to alter spatial dynamics in the broader social arena, emphatically stating: “The church has to take a lead in actively embracing cultures and ethnic people that are coming...breaking down the cultural and communication barriers.” The outworking of this metaphorical position was clarified by the pastor directly responsible for the ESL program as “us[ing] English as a Second Language as a way of developing a better community...a greater understanding and cooperation between people.” These comments point to an institutional vision characterized by a commitment to demonstrations of inclusion (“actively embrace”) in conjunction with deliberate efforts to reverse exclusion (“breaking down cultural and communication barriers”) in the interest of effecting positive social change. On these grounds, it would seem that pedagogical space in the classroom was informed by ideologically defined space at the institutional level.

While it is not uncommon to find a disconnect between expressions of ideological disposition by stakeholders at different levels of institutional involvement, in this case a complementary position was taken by the class teacher whose characterization of what she was doing was also anchored in metaphors descriptive of open space. In her remarks, she enthusiastically likened teaching English in the program to figurative and literal acts of hospitality, stating “...just making them feel welcome in this country...I love that part of it... It’s like you’re welcoming them into your home, that’s what you’re doing. And I do that too.” Furthermore, she depicted this welcome as the beginning of an opportunity to develop friendships, an endeavour enabled by sharing the language which made possible the sharing of lives:

...developing relationships with them, that’s the neatest part about this experience. And giving them an opportunity to share, not just the language, but share about their lives, you know? I love that...getting to know them as human, as people, not just speakers or talkers, you know? Not just on a conversation level but at a communication level.

In the teacher's account, the classroom was thus represented as a place where newcomers were warmly welcomed, positioned not just as language clients, but as people the teacher genuinely wanted to know and communicate with on more than a superficial level. For her part, she positioned herself as someone entering into relationship with students as "human, as people" first and as language learners second. It was this stance of being in relationship that established the foundation for learning, an interpersonal position that became an epistemological relationship—a way of knowing.

However, there was more than social and interpersonal significance attached to the development and practices of the church-sponsored ESL program. At the foundation lay an understanding informed by spiritual values, a connection made explicit by the pastor who oversaw the program:

...we believe in a lot of values that focus around empowerment of people, and blessing and encouragement of people...whether they be part of the church or not...God has made everybody on earth, and has made them all in His image, and they are valuable. Christ in fact, when He came, has died for them and given His life for them and we need to have those same values, to give our life for them as well.

In his representation of institutional values, all people, including newcomers, were positioned as valuable, a value determined not by their relationship to the church, but rather by virtue of their position as created by God in his likeness—as spiritual beings. The identity of newcomers, like all others, was thus constructed first with reference to spiritual values and significance. The supreme value placed on human life was illustrated further with reference to Christ's death to remove the barrier of separation and open up access to relationship with God. Furthermore, from this pastor's perspective, followers of Christ, represented in this case by those in his church, were to embrace the same values in their interaction with others. In this way, the ESL program was depicted as emerging from a foundation where Christ's self-giving, an act of divine agency central to understandings of Scripture and theology, provided the model for human agency. It is a representation that depicts human interaction not just as social text but, in light of the role of spiritual values, as spiritual text, arguably an embodiment of sacred text.

Overarching Metaphors and Alternative Space

Guiding constructs are often expressed in terms of metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and these metaphors can have an impact on the manner in which both teachers and students

approach the educational experience (Williams & Burden, 1997). In the comments above, program providers draw on metaphors of embrace and hospitality to depict their understanding of what they are doing. Both metaphors entail self-giving, and in this context their use may be seen as stemming from an understanding of human relationships informed by the ultimate act of self-giving, Christ's gift of his life on the cross. These linked understandings incorporate the spatial imagery of offering or creating space as a prerequisite for facilitating the claiming of space (Volf, 1996). Some additional exploration of this understanding is helpful in making sense of the alternative space under consideration.

Embrace

In a penetrating and thought provoking consideration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation, Volf (1996) makes the case for seeing embrace as representative of human interaction, that is “the entire realm of human relations in which the interplay between the self and the other takes place” (p. 140). In explaining his choice, he concedes that the image of embrace might seem too intimate for people in some cultures but states that he is not so much interested in the physical act as in the dynamic relationship between self and other symbolized by embrace. It is this perspective that I take in what follows.

According to Volf (1996), in the drama of embrace, the first move, opening the arms, signals one person reaching for another indicating that “I have *created space* in myself for the other to come in and that I have made a movement out of myself so as to enter the space created by the other” (p. 141, original emphasis). Volf likens this both to a door that is left open for a friend and to a soft knock on the others' door. The second move is to simply wait. Open arms stop at the boundary of the other—they are not an act of invasion. Waiting is a sign that although the embrace might originate with one person, it cannot reach its goal without reciprocity on the part of the other. In the drama of embrace, the third move, the goal of embrace, is closing the arms. As Volf notes, it takes two pairs of arms for one embrace; “a host is a guest, and a guest is a host” (p. 143). Without reciprocity, there is no embrace. Yet at the same time, one must keep the boundaries of self firm so as not to be engaged in a self-destructive act of passive assimilation. The final act of embrace is opening the arms again. This underscores the fact that both must preserve their identities. These are identities enriched, but not overwhelmed, by that which has been left by the presence of the other.

Embrace reflects the posture of representatives of the church-sponsored ESL program considered here in that newcomers to Canada are viewed as the ones to be invited into relationship, both in the classroom and beyond. The church-based ESL community creates space for newcomers who want to enter into relationship. However, relationships are not forced and the offer of embrace may be refused instead of accepted, a choice demonstrated at the most basic level by a student's decision of whether or not to attend classes, in this case offered for the price of coffee and cookies for those who could afford to pay. When the invitation is accepted, there is growth in mutual understanding. The hosts come to understand the students more fully, and the students gain a new understanding of the hosts and the culture which they represent.

The classroom interaction examined here suggests that the program does not seek to neutralize the uniqueness of different participants. Their identities are recognized and celebrated in a variety of ways, including highlighting students' home cultures within the classroom and in the larger community. This reflects the final act of embrace, opening the arms. It is an act that demonstrates respect for the identity of the other in the closeness of relationship. It is also an act that does not leave the other overpowered, but enriched, as they go on to encounters in other spaces.

Hospitality

In describing the drama of embrace, Volf (1996) compares the first move, the creating of space, to both a door left open for a friend and a soft knock on the others' door, thereby linking embrace to hospitality. In the program under consideration here, hospitality emerges figuratively and literally in the teacher's account as well as in the developments surrounding Juling's disclosure in the classroom. The metaphor of hospitality as it relates to education is helpfully illuminated further by Palmer (1983, 1998), who notes its origins in ancient times when in nomadic cultures, the food and shelter given to a stranger one day was the food and shelter one hoped to receive from a stranger the next day. In this respect Palmer (1998) writes: "By offering hospitality, one participates in the endless reweaving of a social fabric on which all can depend" (p. 50). Palmer (1983) also makes the link to learning explicit: "To be inhospitable to strangers or strange ideas, however unsettling that may be, is to be hostile to the possibility of truth; hospitality is not only an ethical virtue, but an epistemological one as well" (p. 74). The act of

welcoming strangers and the unknown elements they represent signifies creating space for the discovery of new understanding (cf., Smith & Carvill, 2000; Smith, 2009).

Pohl (1999) defines strangers as people without a place, those who are “detached from basic life-supporting institutions...without networks of relations that sustain and support human beings” (p. 87), a description that characterizes the experiences of many migrants (Ley & Tse, 2013). Offering hospitality to strangers involves making room for those with no place. For those in the role of host, offering true hospitality means sharing themselves and their lives, not just their skills (Pohl, 2002, p. 125). It also means listening. In Palmer’s view, hospitality within the classroom requires not only treating students with civility and compassion, but inviting them and their insights into the conversation. It means assuming they have stories to tell and making space for those stories as part of the process of knowing (Pohl, 1999, p. 79). Making space for their stories also means seeing people as human beings rather than embodied needs or interruptions (p. 178). Far more than a tame and pleasant practice, hospitality in this sense can have a countercultural dimension and function as an act of resistance. As Pohl (1999) observes, “Especially when the larger society disregards or dishonors certain persons, small acts of respect and welcome are potent far beyond themselves. They point to a different system of valuing and an alternate model of relationships” (p. 61).

This kind of faith-informed system of valuing and alternative model of relationships are central to the construction of alternative space examined here. In the accounts of both senior leaders and the classroom teacher, the program and classroom are depicted as places where the host who has cultural power opens up the home, so to speak, to those without that power. Guests are welcomed and given loving attention. As seen in the classroom interaction, their stories are listened to and their identities affirmed. At the same time, the hosts are enriched by the presence of the guests. The reported result of hospitality is that students begin to interact with increasing competence and confidence in the new home setting. In short, the church-sponsored ESL program examined here is a place of open space where those who offer it function as door openers rather than gatekeepers to Canadian society. In light of the guiding values in this community, it may be argued that stakeholders’ understanding of a spacious home stems from a spacious heart, a heart enlarged by spiritual values (cf. Volf, 1997, p. 11).

The Heart of Alternative Space

This draws us back to the construct of embrace. For followers of Christ, reference to his love is inextricably intertwined with his giving of self. The image of Christ with arms open wide, nailed to the horizontal beam of a cross, is an image of the ultimate offer of embrace—God reaching out to humanity, inviting each one into loving relationship with himself. This is the heart of the alternative space considered here, a space where recipients of God’s embrace in turn make space for others within themselves (Volf, 1996), where social relationships on the horizontal plane are practically informed by the vertical relationship of self-giving love between God and people. It is a space where humans are seen not just as biological or cognitive or even social beings, but a space where they are also viewed as spiritual beings whose meaningful existence transcends the boundaries of physical existence.

This has implications for identity and agency. Volf (1996, pp. 208-209) argues that Christians inescapably inhabit two worlds—they are “in God” and “in the world”, including the world of their own culture. As the Word made flesh, Christ entered into the experiences of those around him, enacting the culture of the Kingdom of God in the context of the culture of his day. Similarly, Volf holds that personal transformation brought about by accepting Christ’s invitation of embrace extended on the cross has consequences for understandings of social arrangements and injustice. He prioritizes the former without diminishing the importance of the latter, contending that repentance and forgiveness on a spiritual level are linked to “creation of the kind of social agents that are shaped by the values of God’s kingdom and therefore capable of participating in the project of authentic social transformation” (p. 118). This brings to mind Wenger’s (1998) characterization of identity as a relation between the local and the global, wherein people define who they are by “negotiating local ways of belonging to broader constellations and of manifesting broader styles and discourses” (p. 149). It is a characterization that illuminates the significance program providers attach to the existence of the church-sponsored ESL program as well as stakeholder participation in classroom interaction, all of which emerge as local expressions of the broader dynamics of migration and worldview. It is a perspective that accommodates the simultaneity of local and global ways of being in the world, including contextually relevant expressions of Christian faith. These expressions may further be understood to construct space not only as social text, but also as spiritual text, informed and animated by sacred text.

Conclusion

During most of the 20th century, religious faith was viewed in rigidly defined spatial terms by the Western academy, a position still current in many quarters today. Deemed irrelevant to understandings of consequence in the mainstream, it has typically been relegated to specialized areas of study (Hopkins, Kong & Olson, 2013) or private spheres of existence (Goheen, 2009), and there have been high expectations for an “evacuation of the sacred” (Gross & Simmons, 2009, p. 102). Yet despite the promises of secularization theory, the evacuation of religious faith has not gone according to plan (Grassie, 2010; Melleuish, 2005). Within the academy there are places where calls are now being made to reconsider “the secularist presumptions which allow for a disaggregation of religious life from other aspects of society and self” (Hopkins, Kong & Olson, 2013, pp. 11-12), including in the field of applied linguistics (e.g., Bigelow, 2018; Han, 2018). These voices add to earlier calls by those for whom Christian faith has long been understood as having a constitutive influence in academic spheres as elsewhere (e.g., Marsden, 1997; Stevick, 1990). Not only are they calls to expand the spaces of the academy, they are calls to Christian English language educators and researchers to pursue deeper understandings of the faiths that inform their practices in the complex and dynamic spaces of teaching and learning wherever they may be. In short, to those who choose to accept the challenge, they are calls to thoughtfully examine the texts being made in the living of our lives.

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