Towards seeing language learning and teaching as a ‘moral symphony’

Maggie Kubanyiova
University of Birmingham, United Kingdom

In reflecting on the advances in the psychology of language learning and teaching, the central theme of this conference, I have borrowed from William James’ ponderings on life which he calls “a genuinely ethical symphony”. In this talk, I will reflect on the extent to which this “life” is brought into the language classroom and on how or indeed whether we need to encompass it in both our theorising and our practice. To facilitate my inquiry, I will bring into dialogue two strands of research in applied linguistics: the psychology of language learning and research on language teachers and teaching. I will first draw on data-based examples from recent L2 classroom-based investigations of willingness to communicate and motivation in diverse sociocultural settings. These will be used to illustrate how language learning might be understood as learning to encounter the other and how one is transformed through that encounter. I will argue that this view of language learning necessitates re-envisioning the role of language teachers as moral agents. Building on tradition in research on teachers and teaching, I deploy the term moral to foreground the dynamism between the teacher’s (and the school’s and society’s) commitment to universalizing values, such as cosmopolitanism or social justice, and his or her here-and-now pedagogical and at the same time deeply personal investment in the moments of educational action. I will argue that although inquiry into the psychology of language learning and teaching has shed light on important facets of these learning-teaching encounters, a multidisciplinary approach may be needed not only to appreciate more fully the ‘moral symphony’ of classroom life, but, crucially, to enable both language learners and teachers to act on that understanding.

Keywords: