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Book Reviews

*Critical Pedagogies and Language Learning*

Language ‘is a practice that constructs, and is constructed by, the ways language learners understand themselves, their social surroundings, their histories, and their possibilities’ (p. 1). This is the view presented by the editors of *Critical Pedagogies and Language Learning* in their introductory chapter. I see the adoption of such a perspective, serving as a cry against simplistic skill-based approaches to language education, as perhaps the major contribution of the volume. This is clearly not in line with the dominant mainstream voices of the so called communicative language teaching practices and their cutting edge version of task-based and content-based teaching that have continued to be dominated by a view of language as merely a means of communication. In contrast, Norton and Toohey present a socio-contextual perspective of language learning as the main theme of the book, and highlight social relationships and issues of power as the central concerns of the contributors to the volume. They also draw the attention of their readers to the diversity of localities and specific issues dealt with by the authors, emphasising that ‘critical pedagogy cannot be a unitary set of texts, beliefs, convictions, or assumptions’ (p. 2). The editors organise the chapters in four sections based on their points of emphasis: *Reconceptualizing Second Language Education; Challenging Identities; Researching Critical Practices; and Educating Teachers for Change.*

Although Part I does not appear to be strongly bonded as a section by common themes, the four chapters in this section raise issues fundamental to a reconceptualisation of second language education. Allan Luke problematises the very concept of critical which, in his view, could be thought of ‘in at least two ways – as an intellectual, deconstructive, textual, and cognitive analytic task and as a form of embodied political anger’ (p. 26). In my view, this critical stance on the critical seems essential to a truly critical standpoint, although there seems to be many more than Luke’s two takes on the critical, as discussed by Alastair Pennycook in this very volume (pp. 328–330). Ryuko Kubota’s chapter questions liberal multiculturalism as a superficial and mystified view of diversity and calls for critical multiculturalism which ‘examines how certain racial and other groups are systematically oppressed and discriminated against’ (p. 37). Aneta Pavlenko, arguing for a critical feminist pedagogical approach, revisits conceptions and research trends in mainstream feminist accounts of language learning. In the closing chapter of the first part, Elana Shohamy discusses the application of what she calls democratic principles and practices to mainstream language testing. However, she seems to be reproducing the very concept of testing and the dichotomy of test givers/takers in her chapter. Shohamy appears to have shied away from addressing the question raised – in her own words – by ‘those who believe that the testing era is over’ (p. 88) and by those who
problematise the very logic of tests as ‘instruments that are based on standardisation of whole populations, where all people use the same yardsticks’ (p. 89).

The four chapters in Part II deal with issues of language learner identities. Pippa Stein, in an intriguing chapter, explores modes of representation in a South African context of literacy education. Her proposed assumptions of multimodal pedagogies challenge ‘the hegemony of language, particularly written language’ (p. 95) and raise the issue of representations in ‘contexts that value spoken language, performance, dance, craft, and music more than writing’ (p. 112). Her discussion of the semeiotics of modalities raises the crucial issue of questioning the taken for granted discourses and representations in critical approaches to language studies. Suresh Canagarajah explores nooks and crannies of pedagogical safe houses as authority-free and surveillance-blind ‘hidden spaces in the classroom where students negotiate identities’ (p. 118) in the power-laden context of schools. Focusing on two communities of African American students in the United States and Tamil students in Sri Lanka, and discussing safe-house discourse in detail, the author represents safe houses as possibilities for marginalised groups to construct dormant oppositional cultures of resistance that have the potential of surfacing and flowering into profound movements. The author seems to limit safe houses to dealing with texts but I would see safe houses as multimodal possibilities that could be built in almost any corner of the institution of schooling and education. More importantly, in his view of safe houses as a hope for keeping ‘alive a vision of possibilities’ (p. 134), Canagarajah seems to be surrendering to the suppressive nature of educational contexts and suggesting safe-houses as escape routes, rather than raising the need for the transformation of the very suppressive institutions. Intertextually referring to Ellsworth (1989), Sue Starfield’s chapter is entitled Why does this feel empowering? She explores issues of empowerment in her practice as an English teacher and within the process that she names corporatising Australian university and also in her own positioning ‘by’ the university discourses. The author attempts to highlight the possibility that teachers and learners can challenge and transform their discursive positioning and can construct potentially empowering identities. In the final chapter of the second part of the book, Brian Morgan critically reflects on a grammar lesson and attempts to illustrate how grammar pedagogy can be ‘conceptualized and organized in terms of identity and its implications for poststructural and applied linguistic theories’ (p. 159). In his detailed discussion of a sample grammar lesson, Morgan exemplifies how linguistic forms could be understood in their context of social functions. Calling for attention to a rich practice of linking the microlinguistic and the macrosocial in language education, he concludes: ‘I do believe that those of us inspired by contemporary critical theories might learn from, and quite possibly advance, our aspirations for social justice by way of engaging seriously with the experiences of pedagogical grammarians’ (p. 174).

Although awareness of and reflection upon ones historical, social, and political situatedness does contribute to truly critical learning experiences, I find Munir Fasheh’s meticulous reflection on the term identity, and his caution about it, very relevant in this regard (Fasheh, 2006: 6). He believes that blind stress on the concept of identity may kill ‘the rich dynamic sense of community by a shallow construct … Self-knowledge, self-rule, aliveness, and being attentive to
one’s surroundings . . . are marginalized through allegiance to the word identity . . . It becomes more an idea to write about and debate rather than a way of living’. Critical pedagogical approaches, therefore, do seem to need to be careful about the possible shallow and hollow conceptions created through the neutralisation of their main conceptual tenets, including identity and power.

Part III explores critical language education research practices. Ines Brito, Ambrizeth Lima and Elsa Auerbach, illustrating their nonstandard teaching of Cape Verdean language in the United States, attempt to demonstrate the benefits of situating language teaching in an historical and cultural context. Elaborating on the process of emergence of their curriculum, the authors touch upon issues of assessment as well as the challenges of their teaching of Cape Verdean language and culture. Finally considering their teaching of Cape Verdean language and culture as what they call ‘part of a democratic ethos’ (p. 197) and as an ongoing process of reflective inquiry, they conclude their chapter by brief personal accounts of what each one of the three authors had taken from the project. Bonny Norton and Karen Vanderheyden’s chapter is entitled Comic Books Culture and Second Language Learning. I would have to say that I failed in my search for a critical tone in this chapter. Not only do the authors fail to show signs of the criticality (in any of its different senses) that would be expected in a chapter placed in such a collection, but at times they make assumptions about language learning that are clearly in line with mainstream domesticating language teaching rather than transformatory pedagogies. I observe this regrettably depicted in the authors’ expressed interest in the way comic book culture ‘can serve to engage second language learners in the . . . in the wider target-language culture’ (p. 203) and how it addresses ‘a variety of themes about friendship, schooling, dating, and family life’ (p. 203), without any critical reflection on how the target-language and its associated conceptions of friendship, schooling, dating and family life may be questioned by different cultures. Jane Sunderland’s chapter concentrates on the question of gender representation in classroom interactions, which unlike the issue of gender representations in language textbooks, is not a widely explored concern. Problematising simplistic views of genderedness that have appeared to be a neutralised leitmotif of many so called critical feminist discussions, this chapter raises the issue of the need for a consideration of gendered discourses in a wider sociocultural context rather than in the limited scope of classroom environment. This problematisation, however, could be more deeply discussed than presented in Sunderland’s rather loose arguments focusing on concepts like ‘evidence of female’s often superior achievements in, and keenness to continue with, foreign languages’ (p. 232). Constant Leung, Roxy Harris and Ben Rampton deal with the potential of qualitative research approaches for critical understandings. The chapter focuses on classroom-based interactional data in the context of so called task-based teaching practices in history classes for 9–10 year-old students in three schools in London. Viewing their debate as part of the wider discussions on the structure and representations of reality, the authors invite educators to ‘begin to acknowledge that educationally oriented research should use messy qualitative research data to question the empirical basis of theoretical constructs’ (p. 264).

The final part of the volume, which, in my view, includes the most profound and challenging chapters of the book, deals with transformative views of teacher
education practices. Angel Lin retrospectively describes her involvement in developing a master’s course of teaching English as a second language and reflects on the challenges she had to meet in the process of developing the course. Her experience illustrated in this chapter reflects an example of dealing with critical pedagogy as an academic interest rather than a lived commitment to transformation in approaches to language and to education. Critically and honestly reflecting on her own practice of attempting to provide students with tools to critique forms of domination, Lin admits that ‘I had never for a moment during the course used those tools reflectively to critique my own implication in the reproduction of institutional power relations in my mown classroom’ (pp. 282–283). Kelleen Toohey and Bonnie Waterstone in their account of a joint action research venture collaboratively pursued by a number of academics and teachers, highlight the gap between academic researchers and practicing teachers and raise two concerns that I would view as crucially fundamental and ironically neglected in mainstream teacher education: the need to the transformation of the position of teachers ‘from being mere consumers of educational research to becoming participants in knowledge-making’ (p. 292); and the ‘question of who can claim the power to speak research’ (p. 307). Tara Goldstein, concerned with contexts of linguistic, cultural and racial diversity, represents what she calls performed ethnography through playwriting and acting. Although her proposed practices can hardly be considered critical in nature and are sometimes in danger of reproducing a rudimentary view of multiculturalism and diversity, they also create possibilities for critical explorations and understandings. Finally, Alastair Pennycook in the last and perhaps the richest chapter of the volume critically encounters the notion of criticality. Reflecting on his contemplations about a language teacher education practicum and with a lively personal narrative, he explores several versions of the critical. The first one is critical thinking in the sense of rational questioning as ‘the weakest and most common version’ (p. 329) which amounts to what Pennycook calls ‘liberal ostrichism’ in that it buries its head in the sands of objectivism’ (p. 329). Focusing on social relevance of phenomena, direct social critique and postmodern problematising approaches are the other versions of criticality that Pennycook refers to and comments on before raising his own novel conception of critical ‘as in a critical moment, a point of significance, an instant when things change . . . when we seize the chance to do something different, when we realize that some new understanding is coming about’ (p. 330).

The considerable value of this volume is in its move away from merely cognitive desocialised and skill-based views of language learning and its attempt to open windows to perspectives wider than traditional language teaching as neutral processes of material development, teaching methodology, testing, and so on. Moreover the type of localised studies and debates mentioned in several chapters of the book give due prominence to a non-universal view of research on, and understanding of, language education as a crucially sociocontextual practice. However, occasional entanglement in the trap of a paternalistic critical pedagogy is a main pitfall of some of the chapters. Although, authors of several chapters announce their awareness and concern about ‘authoritative stance with respect to students’ (p. 12), ‘orthodoxies of critical practice’ (p. 15), ‘paternalistic Enlightenment discourse’ (p. 140) and ‘inherent contradictions of critical pedagogy’ (p. 271),
several contributors seem to have simply taken critical pedagogy for granted. They appear to be, one way or another, stopped somewhere in Pennycook’s first four conceptions of the critical (discussed in his chapter in this volume) without critically considering their type of criticality. This is evident in numerous references to terms such as *multiculturalism, empowerment, voice, racism, gender* and *power*, throughout the book, and even the word *critical* itself in contexts where their meanings have become neutralised. This reminds me of the vital need to unlearn and critically question such concepts, one of which – empowerment – used to very much charm me (Ghahremani-Ghajar & Mirhosseini, 2005).

A related concern is about the educational and social contexts illustrated by critical researchers in general and several authors of the chapters in this volume. Raising the issue of critical pedagogical approaches in the context of *South African context of literacy education* (Chapter 6), *African American students in the United States and Tamil students in Sri Lanka* (Chapter 7), *Teaching of Cape Verdean language and culture* (Chapter 10), and *Readers whose language backgrounds include Korean, Mandarin, Bengali, Cantonese, and Farsi* (Chapter 11), may give the impression that critical pedagogy and issues of power and social concerns over language education and use are relevant only in non-Western contexts or in situations where people from specific marginalised national, cultural, linguistic or ethnic backgrounds are involved, implying that the so called democratic societies do not need critically oriented practices. This is, however, far from a real critical stance that needs to be lived in any context and perhaps even more so in some so called developed contexts, as illustrated by a few chapters in this book.

A final point to consider, directed against a distracted understanding of critical pedagogies, is that they may appear to be quite non- (or even anti-)critical if they are subjected to academisation and decontextualisation and turned into regimes of truth. Therefore, understanding that the book can admirably serve as a challenging contribution to the current practices of language education, I would suggest that teachers, students, and researchers involved in language education read *Critical Pedagogies and Language Learning* as a call that could waken the field up from the communicative and skill-based hibernation, but I would also caution that they read it critically lest critical language pedagogy turn into just another academic obfuscation.

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**References**


This is, at once, a lively, scholarly and significant work which attempts to evaluate and place in context the educational theory and practice of P.H. Pearse. It seeks to give a true account of Pearse’s educational plan to recognise the importance of education within his wider political scheme, and of the radical interpretation he brought to understandings of the purpose and nature of schooling. As an iconic figure in recent Irish history, as poet, patriot, visionary, nationalist, literary figure, educator, propagandist and ultimately political revolutionary who was executed for his leadership in the failed rising of 1916, Pearse’s life and work has been subjected to intense scholarly scrutiny, some of which has been iconoclastic, some controversial. It is one of the merits of this work that it uses this previous scholarship and many important previously unused sources in a balanced manner to present a picture of Pearse, the educator and teacher, both in his strengths and weaknesses. It situates this picture among many different context and theorists.

Following a short introduction in which he asserts that while Pearse was not fully aware of the tradition of educational thought of the 19th century, ‘he nevertheless is immersed in the 19th century culture of child centredness’, the author adverts in Chapter 2 to one of Pearse’s basic insights regarding the role of schooling in Ireland which for centuries had played a crucial part in the process of cultural and religious assimilation. ‘The notion of the educational system as a crime enacted upon the children of Ireland remained central to his thinking’.

His main concern was with the curricular content of an educational provision which had tried to strengthen Ireland’s place within the Empire in its syllabus, in its textbooks and this by way of the neglect of almost the entire Gaelic history, culture and language. His concern was to heighten awareness of a distinctive Irish identity by revigorating the educational system. The author points to the school, as perceived by Pearse, as a site of resistance and protest, an objective which he tried to realise in St Enda’s which was based on notions of democracy, freedom and experimentation; where children were led to question and challenge the dominant cultural and political understanding. The teacher was to be ‘an inspiration and an example’ and education should ‘harden and inspire’.

Much of Pearse’s educational writing is taken up with Irish language issues whether dealing with its place in the new university, its maintenance in the Gaeltacht, teachers of Irish, teacher training and the role of Gaelic history culture and language in the system, generally. Pearse also exercised considerable mental energy on methodologies of language teaching and on concepts such as bilinguality.

Perhaps, the most valuable and most interesting chapter in whole book is that which deals with the educational practice of Pearse. Starting with the opening of St. Enda’s at Cullenswood in Ranelagh in 1908, the success of which lead to the movement to The Hermitage in Rathfarnham in 1910, the author relates how the setting allowed the school to ‘hold its own’ with the likes of Castleknock...
or even Clongowes College. Being the first lay Catholic Intermediate school in Ireland, Pearse had to tread carefully. The author presents very valuable detail from many sources on the perception of Pearse as ‘a born teacher’ who made time for each pupil . . . he loved his pupils and his schools . . . ‘and he regarded St Enda’s as the most important work of his life’. His concern for freedom in schooling was made manifest in his establishment of a student council, whose elected captain brought the proposals of the pupil body to the Headmaster. Discipline in the school was operated on a code of honours basis. Some indication is also presented of the weaknesses of Pearse, both as teacher and administrator.

The discussion of Pearse’s like minded colleagues at the school is both thorough, detailed and interesting. McDonagh, the poet and painter was a gifted teacher interested in his work who lent to the school a spirit of high culture. Willie Pearse, also a painter was his friend who shared his interest in Drama. The author details other teachers, some part time and also informs us about the many distinguished visitors to the school, some of whom gave lectures of cultural and academic interest.

Extra curricular activities such as lectures, sport and drama are also delineated, as well as the occasional céilí or social evenings which were a regular feature at the school. The author concludes that ‘while the school indulged in a wealth of extra-curricular activities or was bilingual in method, it maintained respectable academic standards’.

Unfortunately, the story of the funding and the general financial status of St Enda’s is one of outstanding failure to raise sufficient funds, constant pressure for payment of debts for building work, or supplies of text books, or even income tax. Upon his death, Pearse’s gross debts were reckoned to be £2075. Nevertheless, he had demonstrated in St Enda’s that schooling could be employed successfully as a cultural antidote and a vitalising national force.

Having devoted a Chapter to a discussion of analogous school founders, the author devotes the last chapter to a study of the legacy of Pearse. He makes some fine judgments on many of the issues involved. He agrees that Pearse was central to the Gaelic League’s success in introducing Irish into schools in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Pearse also recognised the implications of obligatory Irish and helped to secure its provision at Intermediate level.

Pearse was a committed educationalist who reflected at length and with considerable breadth on the role which an effective system should play in the cultural and political life of a people. His critique of the system, however, was defective in that it failed to acknowledge the benefits that resulted from the widespread primary provision in the 19th century.

Nevertheless, Pearse correctly identified schooling in the 19th century with a colonial mind set which was culturally hostile, indifferent to Irish culture, history and national aspirations. The author makes this very clear and also a most important insight of Pearse that an education system can only be considered valuable when it had ‘its origins in and reflects the concerns of the society that fashioned it’.

It is regrettable that the author was not better served by his proofreader – typing errors occur all too often in the text and there are also some errors of fact, for example, Conal Cannon did not found Sandymount High School – it was
founded by Pat Cannon (his father) (p. 332). There are other errors. Overall, this is an extensive and detailed study of the educational practice and theory of a very important figure. I have tried to give some sense of the valuable and detailed scholarships therein offered and of a very significant reassessment of Pearse as an educator.

This is a rich and insightful volume of which I can only give a taste. It should be read. It is surely high time to reassert the central, heroic and iconic status of this teacher whose shadow dominated Irish history for much of the 20th century. For his effort at re-evaluation in this fine work, we are greatly indebted to Dr Brendan Walsh.

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