

Cultivating Critical Language Awareness in the Writing Classroom, by Shawna Shapiro. Routledge, 2022. 360 pp.

Reviewed by Erika I-Tremblay, University of California-Davis

In *Cultivating Critical Language Awareness in the Writing Classroom*, Shawna Shapiro introduces Critical Language Awareness (CLA) Pedagogy as a framework for engaging students in discussions about their language use, identity, power, and privilege. Shapiro shares her concern that pragmatist and progressivist views of teaching writing “can cause huge pendulum swings in educational practice, creating confusion and exhaustion for many U.S. teachers” (41). Instead, she presents CLA Pedagogy to “enact [the] ‘both/and’ approach in practice” (12) by drawing from composition/writing, education, psychology, applied linguistics, second language writing, and other fields.

Her book is divided into three sections. In Part I, Shapiro introduces CLA by first highlighting ways in which many multilingual and multidialectal writers are affected by the “traditionally upheld” language-driven “status quo” (3). Classroom discussions and instruction of writing often value either academic/standardized language or linguistic justice, which may limit the ways students view themselves as writers. Instead, Shapiro invites writing teachers to “*open up* [their] hearts and minds” (16) about approaches to writing in order to “build our students’ agency as readers and writers” (54). Specifically, Shapiro encourages writing teachers and students to *use language* to practice and participate in important conversations about self-reflection, social justice, and rhetorical agency.

Part II presents four pedagogical pathways: Sociolinguistic, Critical Academic Literacies Awareness, Media/Discourse Analysis, and Communicating-Across-Difference. In this section, Shapiro proposes reflective classroom activities and assignments, for instance one where students explore the origin and nature of linguistic attitudes and prejudices in an autobiographical essay. Here, students are also invited to take on the role of a researcher by observing sociolinguistic patterns in entertainment media. In addition, Shapiro shares a number of pedagogical tips, including the circle share (in which each student is invited to speak), experiments with grouping to encourage participation, and broader conception of participation. Shapiro reminds the reader that these are “menus, rather than recipes” (19) and encourages writing teachers to stay curious so that they can “continue to tailor [their] curricula to [their] teaching context, in both pragmatic and progressive ways” (260). Both pre-service and seasoned teachers may find Shapiro’s pedagogical tips refreshing.

In Part III, Shapiro guides the reader through selecting the pathway that fits an individual teacher’s institutional context and teaching situations. Draw-

ing from Universal Design for Learning, Shapiro underscores that all students and teachers are different—linguistically, socially, culturally, neurologically, etc. CLA provides a framework to “build in access and differentiation” (270) that enables writing teachers to respond to the needs of their own unique pedagogical settings and conditions. Shapiro’s central question, “How can we create a learning environment where everyone feels respected?”, is not only directed toward students but also reflects her concern for writing teachers’ well-being.

Her attention to well-being is pertinent, especially to Non-Native English Speaking Teachers (NNESTs) who may share the feeling of disempowerment that many multilingual and multidialectal students feel because of the monolingual ideology that is prevalent in U.S. schools. NNESTs who may learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL) are often taught to fix any “written accent—L2 textual features that deviat[e] markedly from L1 texts” (Matsuda 23). This practice may cause an NNEST to view themselves as a “deficient native speaker” (Cook) and affect their ability to “make decisions about how, whether, and when to push against standardized norms” (Shapiro 10). Lack of rhetorical agency may also further influence NNESTs’ well-being because the “[g]ood grammar = good person” paradigm is damaging (Shapiro 148).

NNESTs may also be discouraged by a lack of representation. For example, leading roles within EFL learning materials are often occupied by speakers of a white variety of English, with whom NNESTs may or may not identify (McKay). NNESTs may also feel invisible in the academy, as Norm Evans and Maureen Andrade report, there is a “general lack of awareness of [the NNEST] population” (9). Further, antiracist and social justice pedagogy and scholarship are often centered around L1/monolingual student writers in the US context; thus both novice and seasoned NNESTs may feel excluded from these conversations.

Voicing concerns about the deficit perspective and exclusion may feel uncomfortable; however, Shapiro’s work provides NNESTs with ways to “refram[e] discomfort as part of learning and growth” (284). Through language use, NNESTs can advocate for themselves. For example, NNESTs can demonstrate rhetorical risk-taking, such as rhetorical grammar and rhetorical rule-breaking in the classroom and as teacher-scholars to engage in critical conversations about whose voices are privileged in academia and beyond (150-2). At the institutional level, recognition of NNESTs bodies can broaden the definition of the diverse campus community.

I highly recommend Shapiro’s book, which embodies a ethical treatment of native and non-native writers and teachers of writing alike. In this book, Shapiro goes beyond merely celebrating diversity, which treats language differences as an asset. Rather, she is concerned about “mak[ing] people count” by guiding the reader through ways to challenge the master narratives about

themselves and chart their own course through language use (159). Her writing is also engaging: her language is warm and inviting, and she presents herself as a collaborator, not as an authority. In closing, Shapiro invites the reader to “be in touch” by contributing to the CLA Collective, an online resource hub. By doing so, she creates a forum for teachers of writing across education levels, no matter what their language backgrounds, to bring together their expertise, disciplines, and experiences in communities of practice that promote antiracist, social justice, and inclusive pedagogy. In doing so, she advocates for the well-being of all teachers of writing.

Davis, CA

Works Cited

- Cook, Vivian. “Going Beyond the Native Speaker in Language Teaching.” *TESOL Quarterly*, vol. 33, no.2, 1999, pp. 185-209, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3587717>.
- Evans, Norman W., and Maureen Snow Andrade. “Understanding Challenges, Providing Support.” *ESL Readers and Writers in Higher Education: Understanding Challenges, Providing Support*, edited by Norman W. Evans, Neil J. Anderson, and William G. Eggington. Routledge, 2015, pp 3-17.
- McKay, Sandra Lee. “Teaching English as an International Language: Implications for Cultural Materials in the Classroom.” *TESOL Journal*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2000, pp. 7-11, <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1949-3533.2000.tb00276.x>.
- Matsuda, Paul Kei. “Second Language Writing in the Twentieth Century: A Situated Historical Perspective.” *Exploring the Dynamics of Second Language Writing*, edited by Barbara Kroll. Cambridge UP, 2003, pp. 15-34.
- Phillipson, Robert. *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford UP, 1992.
- Shapiro, Shawna. *Cultivating Critical Language Awareness in the Writing Classroom*. Routledge, 2022.
- Silva, Tony. “On the Ethical Treatment of ESL Writers.” *TESOL Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1997, pp. 359-363, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3588052>.