

Guest Editorial: Toward a Critical Pedagogy in the Language Curriculum

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The term “critical pedagogy” is often invoked to suggest that one is moving beyond the superficial into deeper and more meaningful spaces. More specifically, it “includes any classroom practice that addresses difference, power, or social stratification in the classroom or in the world” (Johnson and Randolph 2015: 36). Considering the very nature of language as it operates in society in conjunction with other identities, the language classroom is an ideal instructional context to enact critical pedagogy. While critical pedagogy may seem like a perfect fit for language classes, instructors may be cautious about adopting such an approach for myriad reasons, some of which are unique to language instruction, and some of which are relevant across disciplines. For example, instructors may wonder: Does critical pedagogy have a place in the language classroom, especially at lower proficiency levels? Does critical pedagogy take away from language proficiency goals? Will I be accused of promoting a certain political agenda?

Given those challenges and concerns, instructors may find themselves—intentionally or inadvertently—adopting one of several practices that diminish critical pedagogy in the language classroom. First, instructors may avoid critical content altogether. It is no secret that in our current sociopolitical climate anything deemed “critical” in the classroom is subject to heightened scrutiny by community members and other educational stakeholders. Classroom discussions and interactions related to critical pedagogy can also be messier and more unpredictable than instructors might feel comfortable dealing with. To avoid the appearance of promoting a certain political agenda, instructors may intentionally avoid any content that may be viewed as critical, political, or polemical. Instructors may also enact this avoidance practice if they are limited by the readily available curricular resources (e.g., textbooks, pacing guides, ancillaries) that were developed from the ground up within a critical framework. The lack of such resources puts an added burden on the instructor to make the necessary curricular modifications. Furthermore, instructors may be limited by other contextual factors such as prescribed syllabuses, assignments, or assessments and rigid criteria for class observations and instructor evaluation. A second type of avoidance practice is to approach a potentially critical topic but stop short of critical engagement, choosing instead to focus on watered-down, superficial, facts-based content—that is, stripping the critical content of its criticality. For

example, this might include having students interact with a resource that presents a critical perspective but only asking them to engage in comprehension-style activities with no space for critical reflection. Third, instructors may fully embrace critical content but resort to completing such content completely in English. Although there are times when it makes instructional sense to encourage students to use English or engage in translanguaging, if critical topics are only approached in that way, then it creates a disjointed learning experience in which critical pedagogy is not linked to the language proficiency goals of the course.

So, given the many challenges and possible avoidance practices, how can we do better? First, a commitment to critical pedagogy in the language classroom begins with embracing the fact that language learning is inherently political. A neutral, apolitical language pedagogy is impossible because language itself is a sociopolitical construct. Ideologies about appropriateness, correctness, accent, nativeness vs. nonnativeness, academic vs. nonacademic registers, and many other categories are all socially constructed. In addition, the intersections of other demographic categories such as race, socioeconomic class, gender identity, sexuality, (dis)ability status, and age impact the ways that various speech communities use and experience language. Language instruction in the classroom context is subject to the same sociocultural, sociopolitical, and sociohistorical realities that exist outside of the classroom. If we attempt to focus solely on language acquisition as an isolated concept and do nothing to engage our students in critical pedagogy, we are not creating neutral, apolitical spaces. Instead, we are reinforcing and perpetuating a status quo rooted in ideologies of white supremacy, classism, ableism, nationalism, colonialism, misogyny, and heteronormativity.

Our profession has already adopted a curricular framework that recognizes that language learning involves so much more of the human experience than just communication and oral/written/signed fluency. As outlined in the *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* (National Standards Collaborative Board 2015), in addition to communication, language learning involves themes of cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities. So, the points of entry are there; we just have to be intentional about the ways that we approach curriculum development, lesson planning, and instruction. In addition, integrating the *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* with more critical frameworks such as the *Social Justice Standards* (Learning for Justice 2022) will enable instructors to embed critical pedagogy within the curriculum more seamlessly. There are also texts that offer concrete examples for how critical pedagogy might be implemented within existing curricular frameworks for language teaching, for example *Words and Actions: Teaching Languages through the Lens of Social Justice* (Glynn, Wesely, and Wassell 2018), *The Antiracist World Language Classroom* (Hines-Gaither and Accilien 2022), and *How We Take Action: Social Justice in PK-16 Language Classrooms* (Davidson, Johnson, and Randolph forthcoming).

As we embrace the tenets of critical pedagogy in the language classroom, we may often find that the level of deep thinking and reflection in which we want our students to engage may seem to surpass their level of proficiency in the target language. This may lead well-intentioned instructors to fall into some of the avoidance practices highlighted above. Nonetheless, a key takeaway here is that critical pedagogy in the language classroom can and should be linked to the proficiency goals of the course—and this applies to *all* proficiency levels. This process begins by turning a critical eye to the existing curriculum, considering such questions as:

1. What identities, cultures, histories, experiences, and perspectives are included/excluded, overrepresented/underrepresented, centered/decentered?; and,
2. Are there themes and content that you are already teaching that lend themselves well to the study of power, justice, liberation, and joy of minoritized and marginalized communities?

Answers to these questions will lead us to find points of entry within the existing curriculum where critical pedagogy might align nicely with the appropriate language proficiency goals.

An additional instructional practice that engages learners in critical pedagogy is intentional resource selection. After auditing your curriculum to determine what is there and what is missing, consider how you might use appropriate resources to bring in perspectives from marginalized communities in a consistent way throughout the entire curriculum. Language communities of marginalized identities have long been engaged in their own liberation. Including the (counter) narratives of those communities within the classroom can easily create points of entry for critical pedagogy. Oftentimes, this can be as simple as moving beyond language forms, vocabulary, and comprehension tasks and asking the question, “Who is the source?” Much of the artistic production (visual art, music, film, poetry, etc.) of marginalized populations was produced as acts of resistance and liberation. Taking the time to develop communicative activities related to the background, community, and identity of the producer and not just the purely linguistic elements of the resource will create more opportunities for critical engagement at the students’ appropriate proficiency level.

From a critical engagement perspective, one of the most powerful instructional practices we can do as instructors is link language learning to what is going on in our students’ communities. This inherently includes the students’ own identities in instruction and allows them to explicitly connect the critical content of the course to their own lives. Often, there are speech communities of the language being taught that are easily accessible to our classes. In fact, you may even have heritage or native speakers of the language right in your classroom. Therefore, we must consider how we might move away from far-away (and often imagined) worlds and contexts and make language learning relevant to the real

contexts and lived experiences of our students. For example, students can identify ways that they can join the work of liberation and justice movements being led by community members who belong to the speech communities of the language studied. In contexts where the speech communities of the language being taught do not have a strong presence in the students' own communities, students could examine parallels of the activism and justice work being conducted in those communities and the students' own communities. A good starting point would be posts on social media sites such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, as such platforms provide relevant, timely, authentic language input that is easily accessible for a variety of proficiency levels.

We cannot underestimate the value of critical pedagogy in the language classroom. A language education that is not consciously, intentionally critical will only uphold and reinforce the existing injustices and inequities of our institutions. Critical and justice-oriented outcomes also add value to lower-level language classes in that they are no longer merely steppingstones for higher levels but rather critical spaces in their own right where students can engage in meaningful and transformative learning. Critical pedagogy can at times be messy and unpredictable, but the benefits for students and society outweigh the potential challenges. By starting small and identifying the critical points of entry in our current curriculum, we can continue to tap into the full transformative power of a language education, beginning at the novice level.

Works Cited

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