

## Citation

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## Book Review

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Pennycook, A. (2001). *Critical applied linguistics: A critical introduction*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum. 206 pp. ISBN 0-8058-3792-2, \$22.50 (paperback).

Pennycook's *Critical Applied Linguistics: A Critical Introduction* impressed me in its presentation of different domains of critical applied linguistics (CAL) and its critiques of other theories. In the first chapter, Pennycook states that he risked being criticized for his approach to CAL, which deals with the study of languages, especially English as a second language. This statement prompted me to wonder why Pennycook had to worry about being criticized when he introduced his critical approach to applied linguistics: Is this approach different from existing approaches that deal with the study of English as a second language? Is his critical approach to applied linguistics needed in order to explain other linguistic domains that existing theories cannot explain?

To lay the groundwork for answering these questions, Pennycook provides an overview of the notion of critical applied linguistics as it relates to the new approach he presents. He cites a large number of theories and theorists, either to critique them or to link them as supports to his points. He argues that CAL has to relate aspects of applied linguistics to broader social, cultural, and political domains. His main point concerns how any given classroom, text, or conversation relates to broader social, cultural and political relations. CAL, therefore, is "a way of exploring language in social contexts that goes beyond mere correlations between language and society and raises more critical questions to do with access, power, disparity, desire, difference, and resistance" (p. 6). As a consequence, it requires some background knowledge for readers to make sound sense of the notions presented in this book, which I found to be challenging.

In Chapter 2, Pennycook discusses "Language is Power" and states that "critical applied linguistics needs ways of understanding how power operates on and through people in the ongoing tasks of teaching, learning languages, translating, talking to clients" (p. 28). He also explores power in the politics of language in the context of the colonial celebratory position:

...this is a position that trumpets the benefits of English over other languages, suggesting that English is superior to other languages in terms of both its intrinsic (the nature of the language) and extrinsic (the functions of the language) qualities. (p. 56)

As a second language learner of English, I agree that the belief that English is superior to other languages is thought to be true by many people. For those who speak

English as their primary language, who can use English to communicate or interact no matter where they go, the problems with such a belief may not be apparent. We non-native speakers of English are aware of how much the English language affects our lives. For example, in my homeland Thailand and in many other non-English-speaking countries, possession of English is a great asset, providing a better chance of getting a better job, and of being respected as a knowledgeable person. Parents spend money on extra English lessons for their children; it is not surprising to see Thai students learning English outside regular school hours. Moreover, many companies require applicants to submit their scores on the Test of English for International Communication, basing job eligibility on scoring requirements, and effectively rendering their educational degrees meaningless. For those who already have secured a job in a company, job promotion may depend on their performance on the English proficiency test. From these examples, it is evident that the influence of the English language is very intense. Within Thailand, the ability to speak our own language does not represent an index to manifest our superiority over others. Outside our country, our own language is obviously peripheral, underscoring Pennycook's assertion about the power of language.

I offer another observation which is consistent with what Pennycook presents about the notions of literacies as social practices. He writes that literacy is not only a set of isolated skills or limited to the simple definition of the ability to read and write. Literacy is viewed as a set of contextualized social practices. The effectiveness of language communication involves the appropriateness in using the language, which varies from one language to another. Pennycook states that "literacy practices are specific to the political and ideological context and their consequences vary significantly" (p. 77). This notion of social language and sociocultural situatedness can be more closely explained by comparing the English and Thai languages. In some situations in English, levels of language, such as the use of slang and different accents, are indications of the speaker's social status. We can possibly predict where and/or what part of the country a person comes from by his/her accent. In the Thai language, especially in rural areas where class and caste systems are still practiced, the situatedness of the language plays a more significant role in indicating the status, relationship, closeness, politeness, role, etc., of the speakers. The example I give below will support the notions addressed by Bakhtin (1981) and Vygotsky (1978) about social language and sociocultural situatedness, which have a link to literacies as social practices as discussed by Pennycook.

In Thailand, the word "I", a pronoun representing the speaker, can clearly reflect a social language which indicates the role, relationship, etc., of the persons involved in the conversation. To illustrate, more than five words mean "I" in the Thai language while there is no other word choice other than "I" in English. The explanation I give is similar to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural approach—the reason why in Thailand, there are several words for people to choose to refer to themselves when they speak to others is because of sociocultural situatedness tied to the social class system. One needs to be in the real social and cultural contexts to learn the linguistic rules of the social language because they are not systematic like the general linguistic rules of the language. It is the "situatedness" that counts.

My reflective responses to Pennycook's chapters prompt me to consider how the effects of globalization, sociocultural aspects, and the appropriacy of language should be taken into account when we communicate with each other by using English. To me, although Pennycook's critical approach to applied linguistics may not seem to be totally different from existing approaches that deal with the study of English as a

second language, it calls for more attention and understanding from the native speakers of English to realize that actually they are a minority group of English speakers in the world (Kachru, 1997). As Yano (2001) argues, communication in English between non-native speakers is far greater in frequency, amount, and significance than that between non-native speakers and native speakers. Thus, they should not get frustrated when they communicate with non-native speakers who do not perfectly use standard English. In conclusion, English should be viewed in a broader sense, not only from the perspective of cognitive development, but as a useful language and a functional tool for pragmatic purposes. Globalization makes English an international language, spoken by people all over the world. Hence, the emphasis on sociolinguistics and appropriacy of the language is necessary in the act of communication among people in the world.

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