Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Writing Games: Multicultural Case Studies of Academic Literacy Practices in Higher Education

Christine Pearson Casanave
Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, 2002
316 pages

A quick glance at the title *Writing Games* suggests that this is another collection of communicative activities to vitalize writing classes. The subtitle, however, is more descriptive. This is a study of academic literacy practices: how to play the "game" to achieve success in an academic environment. Learning to play academic writing games is a "matter of learning to perceive ... through the lenses of one's own cultural, intellectual, and personal history ... the roles and functions of writing within localized disciplinary groups" (p. 260).

Casanave uses *writing games* as a metaphor to describe the intricate maneuvers required by graduate students to satisfy ambiguous writing assignments and enigmatic professors. In early chapters of the book the metaphor is overworked, but the message is clear. Among other things, academic writing involves following formulas to produce successful results and acquiring an academic identity.

> Learning the game rules and constructing identities as participants in the game seem to involve the uncomfortable process of actual trial and error practice and of gradually garnering awareness of patterns across conflicting behaviors and practice from more expert participants, whose own knowledge may remain largely tacit. (p. 24)

After researching the subject for 10 years both in Japan and the United States, Casanave delivers her results with many autobiographical details, case studies of the students, descriptions of teachers involved, and reflections on results. Her students are from several cultures, some with English as a first language, some with English as their second. The book is well organized around the numerous detailed case studies that are the focus of the book and that stimulate reflection.

In Chapter 2 several game strategies are outlined. The first is interaction with reading texts and interaction with other students about the texts. Students wrote reading-response journals followed by drafts of the paper. In this strategy students learn the "role of readers and listeners as active participants in the construction and interpretation of ideas" (p. 66). The second

strategy is blending voices, which is merging the ideas and words of published authorities with students' own writing. Game strategy 3 is owning the research experience and producing a good story from it. Speaking with authority is the fourth strategy; the fifth is learning to love writing. The sixth is making the paper look right.

From the students' histories portrayed, Casanave reflects that teachers have an enormous gap in their knowledge about what happens to ESL graduates from US universities who return to their home countries and write professionally in two languages. There is also a gap in understanding what it is like for ESL scholars to remain in an English-speaking university. Casanave asserts that more research should be done on multiple academic writing communities and multicultural academic identities.

Writing Games requires leisurely reading. There is a brief subject index, a long author index, an immense bibliography, and a moderately useful contents. Relocating material is not easy, but in fact there are few specific tips and techniques to relocate. The reader needs to reflect on writing game survival ideas gleaned from the long autobiographical and background details and from the case studies. The reading is indeed worthwhile for the ESL advanced academic writing teacher, especially the teacher who has not experienced the intricacies of academic games. The experienced post-graduate game-player will find corroboration of his or her struggles and relief to realize that the struggles are universal. In turn academic ESL writing teachers will be revitalized to guide their future students.

Ellen Pilon

The Reviewer
Ellen Pilon is an ESL teacher in the International Language Institute in Halifax, NS. She was formerly a librarian in the Toronto Reference Library, and then a bookstore owner with her husband. Now Ellen is studying for her third master's degree, this one in education TESL from Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax.

Critical Applied Linguistics: A Critical Introduction

A. Pennycook
Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, 2001
Challenging the Status Quo

This book is a must-read not just for language educators, but also for anyone in education who feels that the time has come to challenge the status quo. Because Alistair Pennycook in his book *Critical Applied Linguistics: A Critical Introduction* provides the reader with a new way of thinking about and a new line of questioning around the unequal distribution of power and authority in our schools and society today.

Having said this, however, I must caution that this book is not an easy read. I found it challenging and provocative in that Pennycook asks many questions that I could not answer. In contrast to Pennycook's suggestions that this book is applicable to classroom teachers, translators, undergraduate and postgraduate students, applied and critical applied linguists, and researchers, I would recommend that this book is limited to the latter half: researchers (and I would add theorists) and critical and applied linguists. Pennycook is shy on suggesting practical applications for classroom and language teachers in raising questions of power, difference, access, and domination and therefore makes it somewhat inaccessible to those classroom teachers who could possibly challenge the status quo.

Given the time (to read and reread the book) Pennycook can be credited for successfully creating cognitive dissonance for the reader. The book is thorough in regard to the theoretical issues and the types of questions Pennycook raises. Long after you have put the book down, the critical questions of language and power resonate in your mind, and you begin to think about and to look at things in a different light from a critical perspective. And you begin to see how critical applied linguistics could actually operate.

So what, then, is critical applied linguistics (CAL)? According to Pennycook (2001), critical applied linguistics is a critical approach to the study of second- and foreign-language teaching and learning. Proponents of CAL operate in broad social, cultural, and political domains and raise critical questions to do with power, access, disparity, and so forth and how they come to be as they are. Looking at educational problems and conceptualizing them as part of social, cultural, political, and economic patterns in which schooling is formed helps us to envisage the unequal distribution of power and authority that exists in our schools today, and possibly how literacy instruction participates in the production of these persistent inequalities (Siegel & Fernandez, 2000). This is what CAL is about: it forces you "not to seek closure too quickly by assuming a given structure of power" (Pennycook, 2001, p. 172).

Pennycook makes an honest effort to various domains of CAL to show how critical approaches to text, language, literacy, research, language-learning, teaching, and translation all fit. My criticism does not stem from the insight and knowledge base provided in his review of various theories and issues, but from the perspective that Pennycook tries to be everything to everybody and ends up being rather less. In fact in his introduction, Pennycook (2001) states, "rather than simply trying to define what I take critical applied linguistics to be, I would prefer to raise a number of important concerns and questions that brings us closer to an understanding of this area" (p. 1). To a novice this approach can be somewhat confusing; yet there is an urgent need to address concerns as new literacies along with new

modes of exploitation multiply in our increasingly globalized and digitalized world (Seigel & Fernandez, 2000).

Pennycook's book is organized into a sequence of themes in response to the following questions: (a) How do we understand relations between language and power? (b) How can people resist power through language? (c) How do we understand questions of difference in relation to language, education, or literacy? and (d) How does ideology operate in relation to discourse?

How do we understand the relations between language and power?

Understanding relations between language and power can come only from knowledge. Pennycook allocates an inordinate amount of space in his book trying to develop a level of historical engagement for the reader, because according to him this background knowledge is what informs CAL. Granted the historical rendition helps the reader to form a basis for more critical understanding (i.e., it helps the reader to develop knowledge). Unfortunately, Pennycook holds true to the goal of providing only a glimpse of the movable praxis (i.e., a form of action) toward CAL. I believe it becomes a question of semantics: How do we understand the relationships between language and power? For Pennycook the *how* is by gaining knowledge, hence his lengthy reviews. He goes as far as to tell us why we need to understand the relationships between language and power: because there are unequal distributions of power. I would argue that Pennycook has misused the word *how* in this question. I would like to think that in answer to this question—How do we understand the relations between language and power?—that Pennycook would have risked much more by revealing how one moves the notion of praxis forward by suggesting actions we might take.

How can people resist power through language?

Power is something that you either have or do not have, and it is expressed through language. In other words, power is either produced, maintained, or resisted by an individual or groups of individuals in their acts of language use. Pennycook looks to colonialism to explain how power is produced and maintained and to postcolonialism to rationalize resistance. My frustration with the notion of CAL stems from Pennycook's descripton of much research about issues of power and politics—that is, how inequality is created and sustained—but provides little in respect to the practical application, especially in the field of language and literacy, of how people can resist power or how classroom teachers overturn what is taken for granted as the status quo. This brings me to two queries: Why has Pennycook expended all his time and energy bringing the reader only closer to an understanding of the unequal balance of power? Is it because resistance is futile?

How do we understand questions of difference in relation to language, education, and literacy?

In order to understand questions of difference, one must first understand the concept of difference and its relation to power. If applied correctly, CAL challenges assumptions of difference that have been created, acknowledged, or opposed by individuals in society by looking to the context of relations between language-learning and the larger views of society. Pennycook makes it clear that we must recognize that language plays a critical role in the construction of an identity and the ongoing negotiation of how we relate to the world (i.e., do we acknowledge difference, or do we oppose it?). I suggest that the chapter on the politics of difference is Pennycook's most provocative. It forces educators to take a stance, answering the question *Am I part of the part of the problem, or will I be part of the solution to the unequal distribution of power and language in our classrooms?*

I commend Pennycook for driving home the critical points he makes about education. Because identities and differences are multiple, diverse, and interrelated, there is a need for inclusive resources; opportunities for more overt discussions in classrooms; and opportunities for students to make connections to see that these issues of gender, class, sexuality, and so forth are fundamental to identity and language. I believe that Pennycook is successful in his critical approach to difference not only in driving home questions about current practice in language classes, classrooms, and in curriculum, but in planting the seeds of questions about the role of educators and education.

How does ideology operate in relation to discourse?
How do we understand the relations between language and power?

According to Pennycook, power is at the heart of the question of how ideology operates in relation to discourse, for it is those groups that hold social power that are able to promote their ideological positions to the extent that they become naturalized, and in doing so they are able to maintain their social relations of power and become dominant. Pennycook makes it clear that if we have no questions about power and the people who hold it, there is really no escape from their ideology. He offers CAL as a means to reveal the political view of language that can possibly bring about social change. This can be accomplished by examining discourse for manifestations of ideology to reveal how power is held and used by the dominant group. Pennycook's critical point here is that schools as they presently operate serve to maintain the status quo. In Pennycook's view, classrooms should not be determined by the outside world, but rather should be a part of the outside world and the walls within. "From this point of view, the cultural struggle in classrooms is not reducible to one between ideologies of the dominant and

dominated but rather to a whole circulation of different ideas, cultural forms, ways of thinking, being, and speaking" (p. 128). To Pennycook everything in the classroom from how we teach, what we teach, how we respond to students, to the materials we use and how we assess the students, needs to be seen as social and cultural practices that have broader implications than classroom interaction. The challenge, Pennycook goes on to say, is to balance the relationship between the local (what happens in the classroom) and the broader society and to determine how power operates at multiple levels.

A Critique

I don't know what ideological tree Pennycook is perched on, but as a former classroom teacher, curriculum consultant, principal, university lecturer, and presently Superintendent of Education (someone who Pennycook suggests would be in a position to effect change), I feel that Pennycook has distanced himself from the real world of classrooms and has taken a safe and secure stance by so doing. Although I do not argue with the points he makes (they all make sense to me), I am uncertain that Pennycook really wants to effect change in terms of who holds social power and whose ideological positions are being promoted. On the one hand, he presents a strong case for change, is critical of what may be taken for granted, but provides the reader with nothing substantial in terms of structure into how schools and classrooms teachers may accomplish this. His inability to suggest alternatives to the current ideology in power and his naïveté in terms of what is really happening in schools leaves me frustrated.

It is with mixed emotions that I sum up my review of this book *Critical Applied Linguistics: A Critical Introduction*. As I state above, this book is a must-read for anyone who feels that the time has come (and has the time) to challenge the status quo. Pennycook is somewhat successful in getting the reader to think about power, language, and identity, and possibly how literacy instruction participates in the production of inequality. However, the book falls short in practical ideas and suggestions for classroom teachers; is too dense for undergraduate students; has proven challenging to me, a postgraduate student; and does not really address second- or foreign-language teaching and learning.

Phyllis Hildebrandt

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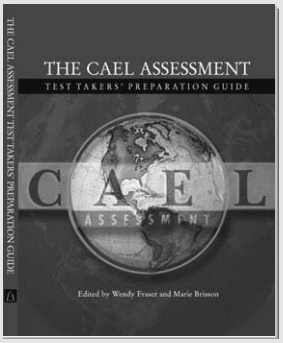

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