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## Editorial

# Theme: Critical language awareness approaches in the Americas: Theoretical principles, pedagogical practices and distribution of intellectual labor



## Introduction

Critical language awareness first emerged as a term in the early 1990s when a group of researchers in northern England (Clark, Fairclough, Ivanic, & Martin Jones, 1990) used it in a series of articles that advocated for the inclusion of explicit discussions about power issues in the context of literacy and language instruction. They wanted to add to the push for more explicit conversations and conscious reflections about how meaning is made with language the idea that these meanings and choices were part of a larger social context. This meant not only acknowledging that certain *preferred choices* were not so because they were more correct (something that most people espousing this view of language agreed with), but also questioning the idea that the substitution of *correct* for *appropriate* hid the power struggles by which certain choices were deemed more valuable or acceptable.

In Latin America, critical literacy approaches influenced by the work of Paulo Freire in the 1970s focused on the importance of valuing learners' ways of making meaning and changing the power differences in classroom relations. The goal was to educate critical, ethical and politically engaged citizens through literacy practices. In foreign language instruction there has also been engagement with CLA in Latin America (Fariás, 2005), highlighting the importance of intercultural communicative competence and the challenges of teaching English as a global language in a Latin American context. This approach emphasizes teaching language as social practice incorporating sociolinguistic and ethnographic research practices. In addition, it focuses on exploring power differences between the periphery and center in global Englishes contexts. More recently, debates in the region surrounding intercultural bilingual education have taken a more critical perspective in response to discourses of multiculturalism, post-colonial theory and indigenous peoples movements (Zavala, 2014). This line of work has foregrounded the importance of valuing different ways of knowing and the necessity of expanding the uses of the indigenous languages to other domains besides the vernacular community spaces. One of the main questions explored here was how relations of power can be transformed and not only how to “empower” those who have been disenfranchised. For example, the work of Gandulfo (2012) on the teaching, learning and use of Guaraní in Argentina incorporated participant Guaraní children as researchers creating a space to co-construct knowledge about their communities and not only be the objects of knowledge production by others. Virginia Unamuno's work (2012) on bilingualism of indigenous languages and Spanish in Argentina has also highlighted the importance of understanding local meanings and power differences in the meanings and use of bilingualism at the policy, teacher education and classroom practice level. Language ideologies and linguistic conflict have been identified as key aspects in the power differences between the social organization of use and meanings of languages in the community. Research that integrates reflexivity about the use of languages is a strategy deployed by researchers and participants in these communities that makes indigenous languages become visible and hearable.

In the U.S. context, discussions about critical language awareness focusing on social transformation have been part of English language (Gutierrez, 2008; Moje, 2007; Rogers, 2004), second and foreign language (Auerbach, 1999; Crookes, 2009; Kubota & Lin, 2009; Norton & Toohey, 2004) and heritage language education (Leeman, Rabin, & Román-Mendoza, 2011). These approaches focus on the importance of connecting curriculum to the learners' social context and creating classrooms practices where students and teachers collaborate in the construction of knowledge and advocacy for social change. However, not all of these approaches have had explicit ways of dealing with language use and development in social context through explicit instruction including language awareness.

When Bakhtin's article on a dialogic pedagogy of grammar was first published in English in 2004, the debate about how to implement *critical language pedagogy* in the context of U.S. schooling resurfaced once again. The power of Bakhtin's

heuristic idea highlighted the importance of analyzing authentic language in use and of approaching the teaching of grammar in connection to its stylistic effects. This approach incorporated the dialogic nature of language to a dialogic pedagogy where teachers and students engage in a conversation about how different choices affect meaning and produce different effects. [Amanda Godley's](#) commentary of Bakhtin's grammar pedagogy considered it as a way to "fulfill some of the aims of current literacy instruction: preparing students for a democratic, pluralistic society; educating a multicultural and multilingual student population; and providing students with the tools needed to critique and transform the world they live in." (2004:57).

More recently, there has been a renewed call to focus on the type of pedagogical language knowledge that teachers need to have to work with multilingual students (e.g. [Bunch, 2013](#); [Gebhard, 2010](#); [Godley, Sweetland, Wheeler, Minici, & Carpenter, 2006](#)). Focusing on the central role of language in teaching and learning ([Halliday, 1993](#); [Kress, 2005](#); [Schleppegrell, 2004](#)) has become key in debates about how best to serve the educational needs of students in multilingual contexts ([Alim, 2005](#); [García, 2009](#)). Central to these renewed debate is the foregrounding of the importance of dealing with language in context in order to problematize and explore the reasons why linguistic choices relate to social and power differences in society. Exploring the semiotic production of social markedness ([Urciuoli, 2011](#)), has become a key focal point in critical discourse studies in education that address issues of racism and racialization. There is a focus on "race talk" in educational settings describing how youth create discursive borders and differentiation (e.g. [Bucholtz, 2011](#); [Schultz, Buck, & Niesz, 2000](#); [Rogers & Mosley, 2006](#); [Trainor, 2005](#);). This work promotes educational conversations that explicitly address power relations and teach conceptual tools to identify them. Part of this work foregrounds more language ideologies of racialization and promotes CLA as a form of making them visible (e.g. [Paris, 2011](#); [Urciuoli, 1996](#); [Zavala, 2011](#)).

From another perspective in sociolinguistic studies of multilingualism in a globalized context, researchers have been questioning the notions of linguistic capacity and the idea of languages and linguistic resources as being part of individual's repertoire only (e.g. [Creese and Blackledge, 2015](#); [Martin-Jones and Gardner, 2012](#)). As situated perspectives these studies highlight the relational nature of knowledge and language resources, showing how what one knows has to do with how one can deploy it in a particular context and in negotiation with others ([Blommaert, Collins, & Slemmebrouck, 2005](#)). In addition, there have also been calls to acknowledge the constructed and historical nature of the concept of *language* ([Makoni & Pennycook, 2007](#)). As [Heller \(2007\)](#) argues we need to extend the conversation and research "from a focus on the whole bounded units of code and community, and toward a more processual and materialist approach which privileges language as social practice, speakers as social actors and boundaries as products of social action" (p.1). This means focusing on trajectories instead of capacities, and description of resources instead of languages. In addition, this perspective opens up a space where ways of making meaning that use all of the resources available acknowledge the mobility and fluidity of boundaries and consider the pedagogical value of *translanguaging* ([García, 2009](#)), *code-meshing* ([Canagarajah, 2011](#); [Young, Barrett, Young-Rivera, & Lovejoy, 2013](#)), or *register meshing* ([Gibbons, 2007](#)). The legitimization of these discursive practices in the classroom makes visible and valuable different meaning making resources without assigning a functional differentiation to different varieties that reproduces power differences. All of these critical perspectives on language, learning and the uses of language in diverse stratified societies point to the continued need to think about ways to design educational spaces for multilingual communication that expand the meaning making potential of everyone participating in them.

The partial history described above serves as a starting point from where to think about how to design educational experiences with a future orientation focusing on transforming the world ([Kress, 2005](#)). With this goal in mind we can identify certain guiding principles that workers developing this approach have in common besides having a critical perspective. These approaches share a perspective on language as a dynamic open system, a view of learning as a form of participation and an understanding of teaching as guided participation.

Applied linguists working in educational linguistics have for several decades pushed for the need to develop critical language awareness approaches that make visible and challengeable power differences reproduced through discursive practices associated with schooling (e.g. Fairclough; Hasan; Brice-Heath; Landson-Billings; Martin; Rickford and Rickford; etc.). These approaches highlight the importance of recognizing the functional value of different ways of making meaning, while acknowledging their unequal status and power in society. The purpose of these approaches is to help teachers and students understand the role of language in the reproduction of social inequality. Even though all of these approaches to critical language awareness share a common purpose, they do not represent a unique interpretation of what pedagogical practices are needed to achieve this goal.

In the critical approaches to language education presented in this special issue, there is a functional view of language that recognizes it as a meaning making resource that serves several functions that go beyond communication and include representation and the enactment of social relations (e.g. [Halliday, 1999](#); [Hasan, 2002](#); [Kress, 2005](#)). This view of language as a meaning making resource and of language users as having a repertoire to make meaning that is the product of their history and life experience makes the political nature of pedagogical practice explicit. Teaching language requires the design of environments where learners can expand their meaning making resources and be reflective ([Hasan, 1996](#)) about what these resources mean in their social world. The power of language to construct the world, and not only to reproduce it make it relevant for students to develop tools to not only fit in, but also to transform the world. And this means that teachers' role in this process is of outmost importance. Their work can contribute to challenge inequality as realized through linguistic means. The main question to address from this perspective becomes *why* are certain forms of knowledge and use of language less valued, and *how* can we contribute to the construction of knowledge by using and expanding the already existing ways while questioning those that have been legitimized at the expense of others.

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