

Book Review

Cultivating Critical Language Awareness in the Writing Classroom

By Shawna Shapiro

New York, Routledge. 361 pages (paperback)

ISBN: 978-0-367-76740-2

Reviewed by:

M. Habibi, Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta & Universitas Negeri Padang

Zamzani, Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta

Ali Mustadi, Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta

Chandra, Universitas Negeri Padang

Language awareness is practiced minimally in writing classrooms. Writing instructions are only intended for students to be able to produce structured texts without paying attention to whether the text meets the linguistic rules (language structure, language variation, and language context). These issues prove that language is only treated as an asset rather than an academic obligation (Leonard, 2021; Sun, 2023). Even in the last three decades, English curriculum has largely abandoned the core feature of language learning, namely “*language studies*” (Hudson & Walmsley, 2005; Kolln & Hancock, 2005). Shawna Shapiro, whose studies focus on writing and linguistics, recently published a research-heavy volume entitled *Cultivating Critical Language Awareness in the Writing Classroom*. Her approach starts with a critical analysis of the background of CLA pedagogy. Shapiro offers a framework for cultivating critical language awareness in the writing classroom based on Wiggins & McTighe’s (2005) “Backward Design” approach.

Methodically arranged in chapters to facilitate the audience, this book is intended for middle and senior high school language teachers, researchers, and graduate students who wish to enhance their understanding of critical language awareness (CLA). Part I (Chapters 1-3) discusses CLA pedagogy and the history of CLA. This section broadly describes CLA as an approach to language and literacy education that focuses on the intersections of language, identity, power, and privilege, intending to promote self-reflexivity, social justice, and rhetorical agency among student writers. Shapiro outlines three common scenarios on pages 4-5 to show that all students need a pragmatic and progressive approach to learning to write. The “utilitarian” approach is not appropriate for writing classroom, as it focuses only on the outcome of writing without considering the effort students put into producing the writing (Habibi et al., 2019). The history of the emergence of CLA pedagogy is the result of two trends: (1) the “Knowledge about Language” movement in the United States and the United Kingdom in the 1960s and 1970s and (2) the broader “critical turn” in academia, including in linguistics and education. The convergence of these two trends gave rise to CLA in the late 1980s and early 1990s and made it attractive to many academics/practitioners in the following years.

In Part II (Chapters 4-6), Shapiro presents four CLA pedagogical pathways for writing classroom which are interesting and relevant to linguistics: *the sociolinguistic pathway*, *the critical academic literacy pathway*, *the media/discourse analysis pathway*, and *the communication across difference pathway*. The sociolinguistic pathway emphasizes the importance of treating all language varieties with respect. Language must be free from racism, especially when used in learning, because it plays an essential role in creating good social relations among students. To realize an anti-racist and socially just writing classroom, three aspects of sociolinguistics (language variation, linguistic attitudes and prejudices, and discrimination and linguistic justice) were comprehensively discussed. The critical academic literacies pathway focuses on the ability of middle and high school students to analyze language use in reading and writing learning. Language awareness through the critical academic literacy pathway can be realized by explaining linguistic disciplines such as academic culture & language norms, disciplinary subcultures & grammar. This awareness can also be built by introducing the concepts of “good” and “bad” grammar and linguistic pluralism in the academic world (p.150).

The media analysis pathway is more easily understood as media literacy. The media in question is news media or digital information media that can provide linguistic

knowledge to students openly. CLA pedagogy through the media analysis pathway can be achieved by studying language variations and language norms used in social media. Being a competent and ethical consumer of information & news is an indication of critical language awareness. Cultivating a critical attitude towards discourse is an essential competency in shaping critical language awareness. Communicating across different pathways can be interpreted as communicating across differences. This pathway looks at the power of language in communicating in everyday life. Language can be used to recognize, name, and respond to different emotions, thus increasing emotional agility (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Understanding grammar (phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics), even for conversational activities (pragmatics), needs to be understood and learned by students to help them realize ideas in writing that reflect critical language awareness.

In Part III (Chapters 8-10), Shapiro offers guidelines for educators to build language awareness in writing instruction. The six CLA principles are engaging students from diverse language backgrounds; using language as a bridge to socially just learning; engaging mind, heart, and body; connecting interest with action; working with rigor around linguistic norms; and building good practices for writing/literacy instruction, must be considered. These six principles are strongly believed to foster students' critical language awareness as they pay attention to every aspect related to language and writing. This is also why CLA pedagogy has an advantage over CCSS/FSPW (American writing learning standards). CCSS and FSPW do not explicitly criticize language norms and standards in writing classroom. However, through the use of these two methods, educators recognize that language variation is a feature that is inherent in speech and writing.

The integration of CLA content in learning, as proposed by Shapiro, can improve students' critical thinking skills. Language sensitivity is directed at various aspects such as social, political, language ideology, linguistic variation, and discourse. For example, in a writing instruction, teachers can facilitate students to discuss controversial and sensitive topics to increase societal understanding. In this situation, students will attempt to use language to manage personal, social, and emotional dynamics related to the topics discussed. However, teachers need to decide which topics and questions have the most impactful learning value for them. Peer review is a critical stage when integrating CLA in writing learning as an effort to build a critical attitude. Peer review aims to orient students to linguistic norms and standards. In CLA pedagogy, teachers should prioritize the quality over the quantity of feedback (p. 299). However, peer review needs to be organized

effectively; some students sometimes do not show interest in providing feedback on their friends' writing (Oleksiak, 2021).

Overall, Shapiro's book demonstrates a strong commitment to language awareness in writing learning that is useful for practicing students' critical skills of language use in various contexts. It advocates for a more inclusive and equitable approach to education, addresses structural inequalities that perpetuate a lack of literacy, and serves as a support for students to produce writing that is mindful of linguistic ethics. It is an excellent resource for middle and senior high school language teachers, researchers, and graduate students to realize that the four pathways of CLA pedagogy are more capable of creating students' critical thinking in writing than a utilitarian approach.

References

- Flores, N., & Rosa, J. (2015). Undoing appropriateness: Racializing linguistic ideologies and language diversity in education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 85(2), 149–171. <https://doi.org/10.17763/0017-8055.85.2.149>
- Habibi, M., Sukirno, Taufina, Sukma, E., Suriani, A., & Putera, R. F. (2019). Direct writing activity: A strategy in expanding narrative writing skills. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 8(10), 4374–4384. <https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2020.081003>
- Hudson, R., & Walmsley, J. (2005). The English Patient: English grammar and teaching in the twentieth century. *Journal of Linguistics*, 41(3), 593–622. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022226705003464>
- Kolln, M., & Hancock, C. (2005). The story of English grammar in United States schools. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 4(3), 11–31.
- Leonard, R. L. (2021). The Role of Writing in Critical Language Awareness. *College English*, 84(2), 175–198. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.58680/ce202131542>
- Oleksiak, T. (2021). Slow peer review in the writing classroom. *Pedagogy*, 21(2), 369–383. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1215/15314200-8811551>

- Shapiro, S. (2022). Cultivating Critical Language Awareness in the Writing Classroom. In *Cultivating Critical Language Awareness in the Writing Classroom* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003171751>
- Sun, Y. (2023). Increasing critical language awareness through translingual practices in academic writing. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 68(3), 1–14. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2023.101229>
- Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by Design* (J. Houtz (ed.); 2nd ed.). Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. https://files.ascd.org/staticfiles/ascd/pdf/siteASCD/publications/UbD_WhitePaper0312.pdf