

## Book Review

**Pennycook, Alastair. (1994) *The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language*. London: Longman Publishing.**

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In this book, Alastair Pennycook examines ways one might consider the role of English in the world that might help teachers comprehend their task differently. He would have them comprehend it differently because one of Pennycook's main concerns is what he sees as limitations in the dominant paradigms in the teaching of English in the world, particularly in the world of Applied Linguistics. He refers to this dominant paradigm as the discourse of English as an international language or EIL (Pennycook 1994:6). He sees this discourse as a superficial one that not only views the spread of English as "natural, neutral, and beneficial" (p. 6), but also as one that harbors an attitude that helps to foster this belief. To illustrate this, he guides us through various cultural and historical perspectives in an attempt to examine the origins of this attitude. He charts the shift in attitude from the colonial beginnings of English as this EIL, to its influence in current world affairs, particularly in today's international free markets as a lingua franca.

His other main theme is what he calls the worldliness of English, which is how and to what extent English has become enmeshed in other nations' social, cultural, and political realities. The author spent considerable time teaching in both Singapore and Malaysia, and he uses his experiences in the classrooms of these two countries to illustrate this cultural entanglement. Later in the book, as the author shifts to suggestions for practice, he highlights these two nations and their experiences with both the learning and the teaching of English as examples of resistance--as testing grounds for re-commandeering English for one's own purposes. These are examples of how to fight back, or as Pennycook puts it, "to write, read, and teach back" (p. 296). And in this pursuit, one uses what is available depending on the situation--what he refers to as the "conditions of possibility" (p. 292). This, he proposes, can be done first by acknowledging the impossibility of teaching English free of its cultural underpinnings (rugged individualism, democratic values, etc.), and then by actually incorporating these themes into the teaching of English, utilizing them as a meta-language. In this way, one opens to discussion the qualities that the language inherently possesses, thus using them as a stepping stone to realize an English that can be better put to the learner's purposes. In short, the author advocates that one brings to the teaching and the learning of English an intensely critical approach. He advocates an approach to education "grounded in a desire for social change" (p. 297) --a critical pedagogy.

I found this book a critical-pedagogical call-to-arms, drawing, as it does, on such seminal figures as Paolo Freire and his discussion of the political nature of teaching, and

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on H.A. Giroux, by incorporating his nine principal features of a critical pedagogy. These features encompass: 1) The role of education in transforming the political life of a society. 2) The need for ethics to be taught in schools. 3) The need to teach about differences--including those between teachers and learners--and how they are established and maintained. 4) The importance of questioning the time-honored concept of curriculum knowledge as sacred text. 5) The need to not only critique existing forms of knowledge, but also to push towards creating new ones as well. 6) The necessity of questioning and reformulating the universalist claims of Enlightenment reason. 7) The need to maintain a vision of a better world worth struggling for. 8) The need for teachers themselves to reassess their own position within education. And 9) the need for a critical pedagogy that incorporates the notion of voice by emphasizing the political nature of the subject and searching for ways that students can come to find a voice that is a critical exploration (p. 299). Through using guidelines such as these the aim is to "pursue a form of critical pedagogy that could intervene between English and the discourses it is linked with" (p. 187).

In relation to multicultural education in general, and to the EFL teacher in particular, this book presents some strong, well-thought out theory that, hopefully, could transfer to the classroom. For example, the author's well-thought out explanation and interpretation of Giroux's ideas provide a number of interesting angles on critical pedagogy that perhaps could expand readers' notions of it.

And finally, Pennycook goes out of his way to address a number of the standard criticisms of critical pedagogy in preemptive fashion. At one point, Pennycook comments how "as a teacher, . . . sections [he'd previously read] on teaching practices often appear frustratingly out of touch with how [he] understands [his] own classroom realities," and that it's his wish to avoid that pitfall by attempting "to lay out some general concerns in developing critical pedagogies of English" (p. 300). I think he accomplishes this objective to a remarkable degree, considering the plethora of varied problems facing an EFL teacher in each country and thus the impossibility of a one-size-fits-all solution.

It is obvious that Pennycook argues these ideas as something to aspire to, as something of a challenge for every EFL teacher, and for that his effort should be applauded. They are ideas that every potential teacher of EFL should be aware of. And considering the fact that his stated goal is "to seek out ways of thinking about the position of English in the world that will help teachers to understand [their] work differently" (p. 5), I think he accomplishes this beautifully. The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language is an impressive attempt to address an incredibly complex situation.