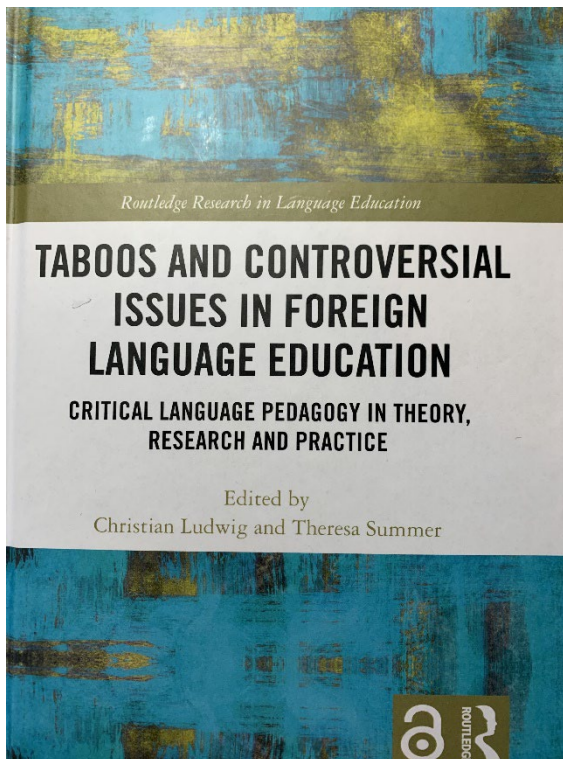




Book Review

Taboos and Controversial Issues in Foreign Language Teaching: Critical Language Pedagogy in Theory, Research and Practice, edited by Christian Ludwig and Theresa Summer, Routledge, 2023, 269 pp., £120.00 (Hardback), ISBN: 9781032116075



The publication of Ludwig and Summer's *Taboos and Controversial Issues in Foreign Language Education* is both relevant to, and emblematic of, the times in which we are now living. Whether in the mainstream media, the Twittersphere, podcasts, or on YouTube, we see fervent debates regarding such topics as 'trans rights', climate science, vaccines, BLM, and 'cancel culture'. As the 'culture wars' continue unabated, we are wedged further and further apart and this polarization has permeated the world of ELT. On the one hand, some language teachers take the position that controversial issues such as those mentioned above are best left outside the L2 classroom and see the teaching of linguistic forms as their primary remit. On the other, there are those who view language teaching as, as Bill Johnston (2002, p. 1) puts it, "a profoundly value-laden activity" that stretches far beyond the seemingly benign, innocuous act of merely 'teaching a language'. With their students, these teachers aim to critically explore complex (and often taboo) issues relating to social justice, and seek solutions to many of the problems we are facing in the world (Crookes, 2013, p. 8). Critical Language Pedagogy (CLP) is one such

approach to attempting this, and this edited volume contains several fascinating accounts of it being used to explore a variety of controversial topics in the foreign language classroom.

The editors' introduction to the volume is titled "Approaching Taboos and Controversial Issues in Foreign Language Education". Here, the authors outline the shifting meaning of the term taboo overtime, and note that taboos "no longer need to be religious", and can pertain to anything deemed "forbidden" (p. 4). All of the taboos discussed in this volume "are either related to issues of social (in)justice and (un)equal power relations, which can be related to areas of race, class, gender, and disability (Vasquez, 2017, p. 3) or to individuals' personal well-being, forms of behaviour, and ways of life" (p. 9). The chapter also provides an interesting discussion of the well-known acronym PARSNIP (politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcotics, ISMS, and pork), a term derived from the ELT publishing industry and first critiqued in the academic literature by John Gray (2002: 159) to denote the "rule of



thumb” that materials writers and publishers use to determine which topics to exclude from textbooks. The acronym has subsequently been expanded upon by others to refer to additional taboos such as periods (i.e., menstruation), race, suicide, nudity, integration, and pornography. The authors then present a surprisingly concise (just over two pages) introduction to CLP. They emphasize one of CLP’s main pillars, namely “that power and domination of certain groups over others [...] should be questioned and challenged” (p. 5). A three-pronged “Pedagogic Framework” for introducing ethically contentious topics that considers curricula, teaching materials, and pedagogy is proposed. Finally, under another mnemonic acronym, TABOOS, a helpful “Guidelines for Dealing with Taboos” (p. 15) is introduced.

Part I, consisting of five chapters, is called “Theoretical Considerations and Insights”. In the first of these, John Gray builds on Irvine and Gal’s (2000) notion of ‘erasure’ to show how both working class and LGBTQ+ people are largely absent or invisible in commercial ELT textbooks and curricula. He argues that this ultimately denies students “the opportunity to see the world in all its human complexity” (p. 29). Following this, Daniel Becker explores how the use of various literary texts and films can be used effectively to “make stigmatized phenomena directly visible” to students (p. 37). Then, David Gerlach and Mareen Lüke consider teacher education and how teachers can best be prepared to teach languages critically. After this, Grit Alter and Stefanie Fuchs propose reasons why some students find participating in CLP-orientated classes difficult. Among these, they argue that insufficient L2 competence can prevent students from discussing complex topics, leading to a decrease in motivation. The final theoretical chapter in Part I is Aline Willems’ “Promoting Resilience in the Foreign Classroom – A Basic Requirement for Working with Taboo Topics”. Here, Willems uses the term ‘resilience’ to denote the extent to which students are intellectually and emotionally robust enough to engage with opinions and values contrary to their own without being “triggered by individual biographical experiences” (p. 57). Overall, the theoretical chapters in this part of the book are both relevant and engaging. However, in a volume containing the term *Critical Language Pedagogy* in its subtitle, I feel that a more substantial, stand-alone chapter introducing CLP per se would have enhanced the section significantly.

Part II is titled “Empirical Inquiries”, and each of its three chapters details an aspect of research that brings theory closer to practice. Reporting on a large-scale survey of adolescents in Germany, Theresa Summer and Jeanine Steinbock consider learner perceptions of taboo topics in the English classroom. They found that students did indeed want to discuss such topics in class, especially when lessons took a pop-cultural approach and incorporated artefacts such as short films and songs (p. 78). Similarly, the next chapter by Summer and Ludwig discusses the findings of another survey that shows that pre-service language teachers are also interested in, and supportive of, efforts to include contentious topics in EFL curricula. In the final chapter of this section, Christine Gardemann highlights the importance of establishing a “pedagogical alliance” in the critically orientated language classroom. Here, she is referring to the “reciprocal relationship of mutual trust” (p. 93) between students and teachers, which is necessary when dealing with taboo/controversial issues.

Comprising eleven chapters, Part III, *Specific Taboos and Practical Examples*, is by far the longest and most directly useful in the book. As the section title implies, these chapters are essentially action research reports from teachers in critical classrooms. The chapters each tend to follow a uniform format that starts with a general contextualization of the taboo/controversial issue as it pertains to language learners. This is usually followed by a concise literature review of related studies, before a rationale for the specific approach adopted. Then, a description of an actual teaching sequence (an activity, an entire lesson, or even a unit of work) is offered. These practical examples are the real strength of the volume, as readers interested in experimenting with CLP in their classrooms, or even just introducing some ethically-contentious materials to their students, will be able to gain a real sense of what might be possible, and what challenges may potentially arise. Standout exemplars from Part III include Valentine Werner’s chapter on swearing/taboo language in rap lyrics, Katrin Thomson’s chapter detailing the use of short animation films to increase disability awareness, and Maria Eisenmann’s chapter dealing with animal rights and vegetarianism. Other chapters deal with such topics as mental health, sexting, human trafficking, racism, death, and homosexuality. The setting for most (but not all) of these chapters is EFL in the German context.

The volume's conclusion, by Tyson Seburn, attempts to summarize and thematically organize the main arguments and ideas from the preceding chapters. Specifically, he shows where and how some of the central tenets of critical pedagogy – such as the importance of “direct learner involvement in the curriculum” (p. 253), and the connection of “students with views, ideas, and opinions different from their own” (p. 254) – were applied to the foreign language classrooms described in the chapters in this book. This was generally well done, but I could not help but wonder why these specific points were not flagged much earlier in the volume. Doing so would have rendered a first reading of this book much more profitable for those less familiar with the theory and practice of CLP. In light of this, I would refer such readers to works such as Crookes (2013) and Crookes and Abednia (2022), both of which provide accessible, comprehensive introductions to CLP.

I have three minor quibbles with *Taboos and Controversial Issues in Foreign Language Education*. First, as mentioned above, I believe a more thorough account of CLP in the introduction was warranted. Without sufficient explanation, some reader-teachers may prematurely and erroneously conclude that CLP is an overly ideological, indoctrinating, and unnecessarily risky approach to teaching a foreign language. Second, whilst the chapters in this volume are generally well-written, some of them would have profited from a more vigorous edit. And third, the price of this book (£120.00) renders it unaffordable to many of the teachers and institutions in parts of the world that critical pedagogy aspires to support. Nevertheless, this edited work is engaging and innovative, and it will be of interest to language teachers curious about how to broach controversial/taboo topics in their classrooms. In particular, the practical orientation of Part III will be appreciated by such teachers. As such, it is highly recommended.

References

- Crookes, G. V. (2013). *Critical ELT in action: Foundations, promises, praxis*. Routledge.
- Crookes, G.V. & Abednia, A. (2022). *Starting points in critical language pedagogy*. Information Age Publishing.
- Gray, J. (2002). The global coursebook in English language teaching. In D. & Cameron (Eds.), *Globalization and language teaching* (pp. 151-167). Routledge.
- Irvine, J. & Gal, S. (2000). Language ideology and linguistic differentiation. In P.V. Kroskrity (Ed.), *Regimes of language: Ideologies, politics and identities* (pp. 35-84). School of American Research Press.
- Johnston, B. (2003). *Values in English language teaching*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Vasquez, V. M. (2017). Critical literacy. In *Oxford research encyclopedia of education*. Oxford University Press.

Lachlan Jackson
College of Law
Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Japan
lockie@law.ritsumei.ac.jp

(Received December 20, 2022; Revised June 20, 2022; Accepted August 28, 2023)