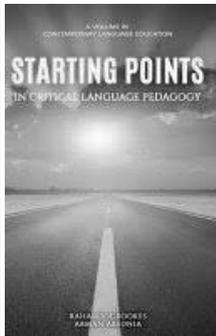


Starting Points in Critical Language Pedagogy

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Starting Points in Critical Language Pedagogy		
Authors:	Graham V. Crookes & Arman Abednia (2022)	
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The spirit of today’s time is that much needs fixing in the world. From the climate crisis to children being deprived of a quality education, international organizations often seek to develop ways to improve life for global citizens. This is also true within applied linguistics, as special interest groups in teachers’ organizations such as IATEFL and TESOL International have sought to establish more accessible and equitable access to language education. One such barrier to equity in language pedagogy is an overly single-minded focus on language proficiency, which many are resisting in favor of a holistic stance that instead seeks to ask questions about what works well in our communities and how society can be improved. From this position, *Starting Points in Critical Language Pedagogy* is a timely book, introducing beginning and experienced teachers to the concept of critical language pedagogy and inviting readers to evaluate the status quo.

The book’s first three chapters provide background and practical suggestions for teachers new to critical pedagogy. Chapter 1 offers an overview of the book, giving background on the “what and why” of critical language pedagogy. The chapter also discusses the teacher’s role as a guide to students in collaborative learning as a means of obtaining greater power in the whole learning process. The theme of Chapter 2 is *control*, addressing a key question many teachers may have: will giving students more power, as is urged in student-centered pedagogy, result in out-of-control classes? Crookes and Abednia usefully suggest several elements that need to be present to create and maintain an atmosphere conducive not just for language learning but also for grappling with the kind of issues that arise in critical pedagogy. These elements include dialogue, questioning and negotiation, time management, self-assessment, and higher-order

thinking. The authors further state that students should work to develop positive affective attitudes, including self-confidence, persistence, independence, risk taking, and a willingness to ask and accept help. Chapter 3 focuses on the curriculum in critical language pedagogy. Subtopics include expanding beyond the syllabus, student choice, and teacher- and student-created materials and adaptation. Such organic approaches to the curriculum resonate with the work of Freire (1973) in Brazil, in which materials were created based on students' lives.

The book's next six chapters are about everyday parts of language teaching: reading, writing, grammar, speaking and listening, pronunciation, and assessment. Each of these chapters begins with a recount of typical practices before suggesting how critical pedagogy could inform changes to typical language teaching. These changes not only add a critical element in terms of content but also enhance students' language development. An excellent example for reading lessons can be found in Chapter 4. Crookes and Abednia took an example from a reading lesson described in Benesch (2006) for first-year students, mainly immigrants, at a U.S. university. The technique used was similar to the noticing tasks used to teach grammar in which students compare the use of various grammatical structures and provide rationale for using a structure in a particular context (Batstone & Ellis, 2009). Bringing in an element of critical language pedagogy, Benesch had students read two articles each about recent protests against a war and identified similarities and differences. With help from teachers and other resources, students can raise their awareness of social, economic, and environmental issues alongside working on reading skills, thereby countering the argument that critical pedagogy diverts attention from enhancing students' language proficiency.

In the final two chapters, the authors make suggestions for developing critical language pedagogy beyond the classroom. Chapter 10 provides ideas on the development of critical language teachers. This development could come via formal education, as well as by networking among like-minded educators, exploring the professional literature, and trying out new ideas in consultation with colleagues and students. Chapter 11 makes the important point that critical language activities need not be confined to classrooms. Crookes and Abednia discuss service learning, combining service with and to others with the educational institution's curriculum. Service learning is best done in conjunction with those being served so as to make the service as useful as possible.

Starting Points in Critical Language Pedagogy has many great aspects, but there are a few areas in which it could be improved. First, while the book touches on many global challenges, it leaves out an important issue that belongs in critiques of the status quo: the way that humans use our fellow animals for food. This animal agriculture links closely with pandemics, world hunger, climate change, chronic disease, and the suffering and premature death of hundreds of billions of nonhuman animals. In terms of layout, the book could have included author and subject indexes for ease in finding topics of interest. One final issue is that *Starting Points in Critical Language Pedagogy* costs USD\$45.04 (paperback) and USD\$85.74 (hardcover) before shipping, making the cost to access this book too high for those in the Global South whose students may greatly benefit from this form of education.

Despite the book's minimal shortcomings *Starting Points in Critical Language Pedagogy* is commendable for its down-to-earth approach. The first two words in the book's title are "starting points," and as such, beginners to language teaching and to critical pedagogy will find this book approachable and accessible. Although the book takes a theoretical focus on the topic, it provides clear explanations and does not require any prior knowledge. Practice is the core goal, and the authors avoid complicated lesson plans that are specific only to particular contexts or groups of students. At the same time, veterans of the practice will also find much value here as well. The more teachers and students learn about the issues the world faces—climate change,

war, social injustice, etc.–the more urgent critical language pedagogy becomes. Crookes and Abednia offer the tools teachers need to bring critical language pedagogy into the classroom and guide students toward making a positive impact on our world.

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