

Critical Literacy Pedagogy for Bilingual Preservice Teachers

Hyesun Cho

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Exploring Social Identity and Academic
Literacies

 Springer

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To Mom

Foreword

A little over 15 years ago, I met Hyesun Cho. We were doctoral students in the same cohort at Michigan State University in East Lansing, MI. Very quickly we became study partners. Then friends. There were few people in those days I met whose pen evoked the precision of clarity, whose mind was iridescent and critical, and whose gentle hand against the brisk page mimicked the ethereal ways of the breeze. Cho's did, and she was not only a gifted writer; she was a rare thinker, one whose ideas about language and education proved, even back then, transformational.

Cho was never a traditional doctoral candidate. By the time I met her in the fall of 2001, she had taught English as a foreign/second language to students in South Korea and Hawaii for several years. She was an English learner herself; English was among her many collected tongues. It certainly was not her first. Cho's students were like her—language learners. They were somewhat privileged, learning English to extend not only their linguistic repertoires but also their capacities for mobility. In this not too distinct reality—it was obviously a blur—language and status were intertwined. Having more language was like having a bigger home or a fleet of exquisite cars. And having English was like driving linguistic luxury. With it, one could imagine being able to travel the world better, farther, faster, and with a particular kind of swag.

Cho, however, entered into this world unusually curious and with a peculiar set of questions about the relationship between language and power, language and identity, and language and the societies that merged around her. (Discourse) communities of power, place, and practice: “What does it all mean?” she would ask. Out of this question would emerge a series of meanderings: How might the imposition of English as a global project of indenture promote the erasure, or blotting, of tongues, geographies, and bodies? Her questions were transcending issues of linguistic form and function—of linguistics all together. They were eliciting the reality that language education is inherently political, thus redirecting language pedagogues to focus on the costs while acknowledging the stakes, the linguistically vulnerable, and the apparatuses of instruction imagined to marginalize them.

It never dawned on me back then, but Cho had little reason to fully invest in the pedagogical struggles of the linguistically vulnerable. She had made a living as an educator, someone who could help others extend their worlds by helping others extend their words and the audiences with whom they might communicate. A teacher of language, her initial project was as translator and guide, uncritical, or at least seemingly apolitical, in a drive to help others become as she had—cosmopolitan, a border crosser, and hybrid language user possessing multiple identities expressed complexly in variance through a myriad of tangled tongues.

In the “flattening world” between Seoul and East Lansing, between South Korea and the USA, bilingual education was a lucrative business. Its value emerged in the fog of war, where Cold War campaigns (notably the Korean War, but not exclusively) placed language center stage. In this context, a particular type of struggle would be waged on sociolinguistic battlefronts as much as they would on geographic ones. Nestled in the full-throated embrace of Western civilization and culture, the global bilingual education agenda during and after the Cold War, particularly in places such as South Korea, found itself more lost in Western priorities than ever before. To be an English teacher in South Korea (like other parts of East Asia) was like having a sturdy shovel in a coal mine: you’d never be lost for work because the franchise of Western capitalism had so created a new and bountiful marketplace for the English language that there seemed to be a limitless demand for bilingual teachers.

In this neoliberal, neocolonial context, Cho imagined the *work* differently than how war and the resulting Western empire had defined it. For Cho, bilingual education had to deal with the crippling issue of power, defined as a competition of interests—both collective and individual. In subsequent years—and even in this work—Cho would ask: Whose interests would bilingual education serve? What would be its costs? What would be its benefits? What and who gets privileged? What and who is disadvantaged? Cho’s exploration into bilingual education framed conceptualizations of language learning in critical social theories. Instead of bilingual education, she was exploring a new realm of critical bilingual education, an apparatus of new language education that suggests that language learning is neither neutral nor politically innocent.

Framed by a broader theory of critical bilingual education, Cho believed then, as she does now, that bilingual teachers had to learn to teach across differences as opposed to working to eradicate them and that bilingual education had to be “culturally sustaining” as opposed to uncritically assimilating. Thus, bilingual preservice teachers, themselves, required raised consciousnesses so that they could help guide emergent bilingual students through the vast transformative, though complex, processes of learning languages without losing souls.

As neocolonial capitalist practices exchanged the previous ways of social and cultural domination—the occupation and gross exploitation of the world beyond the West—English language learning became commodified. As previously mentioned, the English language itself became a patented commodity of franchise capitalism, and a form of the English language began to be pilfered throughout the globe, steadily but particularly in the global East, like linguistic cotton. Those who could

pick enough of it, and even the better in its purest form, could acquire the requisite social capital to purchase freedoms to expand their universes. These English possessors would gain open access to the cultural and geographic bridges that once separated the global East from the global West. This freedom, however, for many would come with a cost. To travel linguistic distances, some would be forced to forsake the social identities hardwired into their primary discourse (i.e., home language). This paradigm for language learning has been dominant in bilingual education for decades and has often meant significant sacrifices of important parts of self, including one's birth identity.

Thus, with linguistic wealth came grave degrees of social poverty. As the world became more open to emergent bilingual students, racial, cultural, and sociolinguistic judgments made the same world more restrictive and toxic. A type of coded linguisticism set in and non-dominant learners of English as a new language would have to confront this strange, though enduring, artifact of bias. This bias is the summative narrative framing, such instances as the 1974 Supreme Court *Lau v. Nichols* civil rights case (414 U.S. 538), which was brought by limited English-proficient Chinese American students living in San Francisco, CA. The students maintained that they were being denied access to quality educational services because of their emergent English statuses. Such linguistic bias/educational denial on the basis of language, the US Supreme Court decided, violated Title VI protections under the Civil Rights Act of 1964. With the US Supreme Court's ruling in favor of the students, the *Lau v. Nichols* case became a landmark in the ongoing struggle for linguistic justice. While the high court declared that an educational injustice had indeed occurred in San Francisco in 1974, it must not be lost on us that similar, and perhaps worse, injustices deeply rooted in linguistic prejudice endure to this day.

Still, an exquisite set of questions arose out of *Lau v. Nichols*. Perhaps chief among them were questions about bilingual preservice teacher preparation: How might we better prepare bilingual teachers to meet the complex sociocritical learning needs of emergent bilingual students? How might such teachers be prepared in ways that resolve tensions between social (language) identity and academic literacies? In addressing these questions, Cho sees another, more complicated, meaning in the history of linguistic justice, one that defies traditional language (teacher) education. Her awareness of both teaching emergent bilingual students and of being such a student herself has given her tremendous foresight—a lens for exploring the complexities (historical and social) of bilingual education. Rarely have we had such a scholar whose association with her field is itself hybrid and deeply personal. From all vantage points, Cho is the third space about which she writes. She is, at once, the emergent bilingual student, the bilingual preservice teacher, and the bilingual teacher educator folded into one exquisite body and mind. It is in this vein that she writes, “this research is part of a lifetime journey, one that entails practices of challenges, promises, and possibilities.”

When all is told, what appears is a particular type of narrative, what Cho sees as a “literacy autobiography,” purposed to help teachers of languages and teachers of teachers of languages reach actualization in the linguistic pedagogical third space.

Through her own bio-ethnographic, narrative research, Cho reveals a framework for teacher *conscientization*, a pedagogy of praxis where inquiry is applied as action, where learning language is situated in complex sites of practice. In this dialogic, heteroglossic space, domination is never totalizing because the ideological self is ever becoming. It is here that we find people enriched with agency, or what feminist scholars term subjectivity—a deep sense of one’s self and one’s possibilities for acting.

Beyond beautiful moments of theorization, there is also another kind of beauty in Cho’s analysis. Unlike other texts of this kind—which feel overly romantic and a little easy on “solutions”—Cho remains honest about the transformation process, both the hiccups and challenges of enacting critical bilingual education as critical literacy pedagogy in authentic language learning spaces. For her, there is no easy route to utopia in language education, nor is there an unmapped oasis waiting to be found. There are tensions, particularly associated with addressing inequity in the design of critical bilingual education. There are also tensions of perception, where students and others see such an approach to learning language as dogmatic, complicated, and “too political.”

In this light, Cho gives us an honest account of language education from multiple, yet situated, vantage points, from the potential backlash and movements to diminish the spirit for collectivity to the accentuating, even glorifying, of the role of the individual in determining her or his own linguistic fate. At some point, it all becomes folly. In this light, the process itself, though hopeful, for Cho can be filled with tremendous trepidation: stark and stubborn disparities between the few versus the many and the unprecedented reach of labels such as LEP and SPED that (re)design discrimination in language education through logics that work to reify our unspoken educational caste system.

In spite of these challenges of absorption, Cho gives us a route to transformation, showing us that there can be no resolution in bilingual education without a particular critical lens—a transformational apparatus capable of reasserting the primacy of the journey. The journey sees learning language as an unending path rather than a particular destination. It is with this idea, the idea of journey, that Cho achieves her most important work: that we all occupy this moment in struggle upheld by a “practical hope,” that “a society devoid of ‘practical hope’ cannot envisage possibilities and promises for its bilingual and bicultural participants, both individually and collectively.” In this way, she sums up this work: “This book is a journey of exploring the individual and collective transformations of utilizing PAR that promised to inform both pedagogical practices and theoretical constructs.” For Cho, the journey, more than the destination, is so important because it has the power to lead us into the heart and soul that we might breach the edges of hope and the beginnings of possibility.

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