Critical and Alternative Directions in Applied Linguistics

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Critical directions in applied linguistics can be understood in various ways. The term critical as it has been used in critical applied linguistics, critical discourse analysis, critical literacy and so forth, is now embedded as part of applied linguistic work, adding an overt focus on questions of power and inequality to discourse analysis, literacy or applied linguistics more generally. In this paper I will argue, however, that although critical discourse analysis and critical literacy still make claims to a territory different from their ‘non-critical’ counterparts, much of this work has become conventional and moribund. The use of the term ‘critical’ (with its problematic claims and divisions) has perhaps reached saturation level. This is not to say, however, that the basic need to bring questions of power, disparity and difference to applied linguistics is any way diminished, but rather that we may need to look in alternative directions for renewal.

Here I want to pursue two main possibilities: On the one hand, the effects of critical work have been widely felt, so that the issues and concerns raised by work in this tradition have filtered through to many parts of the field. Work today that might be deemed critical may no longer need to wear this label. On the other hand, a range of different social theories (captured in part by a series of ‘turns’) has started to shift the thinking in many domains of applied linguistics in important ways. Just as work in sociolinguistics, for example, has shifted from a central focus on variationist accounts of language to include style, identity, practices and politics more broadly, and work in bi- and multilingualism has started to question the ways in which these are framed (hence, for example, multilanguaging, polylingualism and metrolinguism), so applied linguistics has shifted from a central focus on language teaching, testing and second language acquisition to a broader and more critical conceptualization of language in social life. It has started to take on board the implications of new ‘turns’ in the social sciences (practices, sensory, somatic, postmodern, ecological, decolonial) and new influences from previously overlooked sources (queer theory, critical geography, postcolonial studies, philosophy). Critical and alternative directions in applied linguistics, therefore, may be found across a variety of domains that are engaging with notions such as language as a local practice.
TENSIONS AND NEW CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY

Critical applied linguistics seemed to be a movement that needed to happen. My initial call to arms (or perhaps, better described, my overt naming of a growing movement) – ‘towards a critical applied linguistics for the 1990s’ (Pennycook, 1990) – grew out of the frustration as a graduate student with the paucity of politics and possibilities in applied linguistics for dealing with major concerns of difference and disparity in relation to language. Aimed largely at the dual foes of structuralism and positivism, I argued that the dominance of these perspectives rendered it almost impossible to link applied linguistic concerns to central social and political problems of inequality, discrimination and difference. As applied linguists, I argued, ‘we need to not only understand ourselves as intellectuals situated in very particular social, cultural and historical locations, but also to understand that the knowledge we produce is always interested. If we are concerned about the manifold and manifest inequities of the societies and the world we live in, then I believe we must start to take up moral and political projects to change those circumstances. This requires that we cease to operate with modes of intellectual inquiry that are asocial, apolitical or ahistorical’ (Pennycook, 1990, p. 25). I concluded by suggesting further that we ‘would also do well to be more humble in the world, listening to the many alternative views of language and learning, rather than preaching our views as the newest and best. Engaging in critical work is by no means easy, but I believe it is essential that those of us who feel that change must and can be brought about need to start developing a means of pursuing applied linguistics as a critical project’ (Pennycook, 1990, p. 26). Very 1990s.

A decade later, I tried to pull the strands of critical applied linguistics together by summarizing and integrating the different strands of critical work that were already going on, from critical discourse analysis to critical literacy, from critical pedagogy to critical classroom discourse analysis (Pennycook, 2001). A version of this summary can be seen in Table 16.1 below. One of the issues that emerged was a difficulty of naming: Some areas named themselves as ‘critical’ and in doing so were largely drawing on similar bodies of thought. Others, however, were evidently critical in the same way but did not name themselves in this way. Feminist work was an obvious example, and there was an obvious tension here if we attempted to include feminism as a subcategory of critical work (not a smart move politically). Some areas, such as anti-racist education, might be included as part of critical multiculturalism, though always with caution. While feminist and anti-racist work seemed in a sense critical by definition – their premises of revealing discrimination, opposing inequality, and aiming to bring about change, matched basic
criteria of critical work – a third category also emerged: Those areas of work that adopted a critical attitude towards their subject matter but which did not name themselves in this way. This included areas such as (critical) approaches to translation, or (critical) language policy.

Another problem that emerged in this process was one of scope and boundaries: critical applied linguistics could not of course encompass all of this work. Critical pedagogy, for example, was much broader than work in applied linguistics, and while a definition such as critical approaches to second language teaching (Norton and Toohey, 2004, p. 1) helped define the area, it was always a difficult task to decide what should be included in what. Another problem was the issue of exclusion: The moment you start out on a project to define an area, you are inevitably engaged in a process of inclusion and exclusion, in this context trying to decide whether something was critical or not. Once this was opened up to those areas that didn’t necessarily label themselves as critical, contentious boundaries had to be drawn around certain forms of work. These difficulties notwithstanding, it did seem possible to come up with a useful overview of work that was critical and part of applied linguistics (Table 16.1).

The need to define what is meant by critical, however, was always going to be fraught. This is how I tried it then, arguing that critical applied linguistics ‘is more than just a critical dimension added on to applied linguistics: It involves a constant scepticism, a constant questioning of the normative assumptions of applied linguistics. It demands a restive problematisation of the givens of applied linguistics, and presents a way of doing applied linguistics that seeks to connect it to questions of gender, class, sexuality, race, ethnicity, culture, identity, politics, ideology and discourse. And, crucially, it becomes a dynamic opening up of new questions that emerge from this conjunction.’ (Pennycook, 2001, p. 10) At the heart of this book, as can be seen from the above quote, there was always a tension, a product of my intention for this to be a critical introduction to critical applied linguistics, as well as my own interest in those forms of critique that carried a post prefix (postmodern, poststructural, postcolonial) as opposed to those I saw as modernist, materialist and structuralist. Not only was this a contentious move since it was critical of much of what seemed to be the cornerstone of critical applied linguistics – CDA, linguistic imperialism and so on – but it was always potentially ambiguous in that it aimed to both include this work as part of the critical project and to critique it. At the heart of this problem was the concern that we needed to engage in what I called a ‘problematising practice’. That is to say, we should always question the terms and frames with which we deal. For some, this led to too great a postmodern slipperiness, where we never knew where we stood, and from where it was therefore too hard to
ground a critical project. For me, this remains one of the difficult and fascinating conundrums of the project. It was also why I talked of ‘applied linguistics with an attitude’ in the final chapter of the book, in an attempt to move away from the need to always append the word ‘critical’ to a project to maintain its political credentials.

I do not want to suggest that this conundrum – how to include both firm enough ground to engage in political action while always simultaneously questioning the grounds on which such thought and action are located – renders the critical applied linguistic project unworkable. Rather, we need to appreciate that any sophisticated approach to language and politics must inevitably operate with such tensions. In trying to explain what is meant by the general term ‘critical’ – while avoiding the traps of drawing too narrow an intellectual lineage through the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory (as do a number of critical projects) or casting a net too wide and including the blandness of critical thinking – it may be useful to see it in terms of a project of ‘decentring’. From the humanist challenge to the centrality of religious thought, Freud’s unravelling of the hidden workings of the mind, or Marx’s insistence that history and change had to do with the masses rather than the bourgeoisie, to the feminist challenge to man’s assumptions of centrality, the postcolonial challenge to Europe and European history, the fights against white privilege, or the struggle against heteronormativity, critical work has always sought to challenge an assumed centre, where power and privilege lie, and to rework both the politics and the language that sustain them. It has thus always had to struggle against the language and ideas through which the world is defined (the givens, the assumptions, the generics) as well as the inequalities these maintain.

Although I am nevertheless arguing for a move away from the incessant use of the ‘critical’ label, it is also important to understand that critical applied linguistic work has over a decade or more changed the conditions of possibility for what can be done in applied linguistics. It has now become more possible than it used to be to invoke post-structuralist arguments, to talk of hegemony or heteronormativity. In a recent issue of the Journal of Language, Identity and Education, for example – a journal itself born out of the struggles to get issues of language, identity and politics on the applied linguistic agenda – Liddicoat (2009) shows how the ‘The expression of nonheterosexual identities becomes constructed as an enactment of limited linguistic competence rather than a performance of self; and where the performance does not adhere to the heteronormative context of the classroom, it is explained through linguistic failure’ (p. 201). The struggle to develop more complex understandings of gender and sexuality and to have questions of nonheterosexual identities and heteronormativity discussed in the context of applied linguistics has been a long and sometimes difficult one (Cameron, 2005; Cameron and...
Kulick, 2003; Nelson, 1993, Nelson, 1999, Nelson, 2009). The conditions of possibility for such work have now shifted, however, and while Liddicoat (2009) nowhere in his article invokes the word ‘critical’, I would argue that such work is made possible by – and in turn continues to make possible – a continuing critical approach to applied linguistics. A similar point can be made about recent books such as Gregorio Hernandez-Zamora’s work on literacy in the lives of impoverished Mexicans (Hernandez-Zamora, 2010), or Higgins’ and Norton’s work on language and HIV/AIDS (Higgins and Norton, 2010). The conditions of possibility for such work have been forged in two decades of struggle for legitimacy, and this work now provides the platform for more such work, whether it wears the ‘critical’ label or not.

**NEW DIRECTIONS IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS**

Australian applied linguistics, it could be argued, has long been oriented towards the more critical, social or political end of applied linguistics. On the one hand, the strong relation between descriptive linguistics and Indigenous languages has meant that a great deal that has been done in the field of language description has also had a political cause for the promotion, maintenance, development and use of such languages. Nick Evans’ recent book, for example, aims to ‘show why we should care about the silent epidemic of language loss that is occurring throughout the world, how diverse and profound are the lessons that these obscure and neglected tongues have to offer to the sum of our human heritage, and how we can go about listening to and learning from them before too late’ (Evans, 2010, p. 230). The focus on other multilingual contexts of Australia, particularly in the field of language policy (e.g. Lo Bianco, 2009), has also had a significant influence here. On the other hand, the strong interest in social semiotics has meant that this other strand of Australian linguistics, which has been widely employed for the base of much work in critical discourse analysis, has always insisted on the social as part of any linguistics. We have surely been fortunate as Australian applied linguists that the dominant strands in linguistics here tend towards a social and political account of language in the world. The tradition that Australia has also developed in areas such as critical literacy (e.g. Muspratt, Luke and Freebody, 1997), language policy and so forth, is surely also linked to this.

Meanwhile, however, the wider world of applied linguistics is also moving on, and it is of no use to look at Australian applied linguistics as an insular campaign. While the world has a lot to learn from the vibrant and socially-oriented field of applied linguistics in Australia, so too must we be very cognizant of current shifts in thinking elsewhere.
Although we may critique the monolingual ideologies that are resistant to an understanding of bi- and multilingualism, for example, we must also consider carefully the monolingualism that may also underpin what we consider to be our own versions of plurilingualism. Current cultural, social, geopolitical and linguistic thinking is dominated by a celebration of multiplicity, hybridity and diversity. Within this trend, terminology such as multiculturalism, multilingualism and cosmopolitanism are taken as a focus and a desirable norm in various fields including policy making and education. One of the problems here, however, is that underlying ideologies of multilingualism and multiculturalism all too often continue to operate with multiple discrete languages and cultural practices (Makoni and Pennycook, 2007). Notwithstanding the fact that there is an increase in the number of studies that shift away from conceiving language as an adequate base category towards a focus on features, styles or polylingual resources in order to explicate late modern bi/multilingualism (Bailey, 2007; Coupland, 2007; Jørgensen, 2008; Rampton, 2009), the difficulty still lies in fully escaping and dissociating from old statist language ideologies.

In a recent attempt to move this debate forward, Emi Otsuji and I (Otsuji and Pennycook, 2010) have started talking in terms of metrolingualism, which describes the ways in which people of different and mixed backgrounds use, play with and negotiate identities through language; it does not assume connections between language, culture, ethnicity, nationality or geography, but rather seeks to explore how such relations are produced, resisted, defied or rearranged; its focus is not on language systems but on languages as emergent from contexts of interaction. Drawing on Maher’s (2005) discussion of metroethnicity – the ways in which ethnicity is reconstructed in urban contexts by young people who orient towards hybrid, multicultural lifestyles – as well as the queering of identities represented by metrosexuality (Coad, 2008; Nelson, 2009), metrolingualism, accordingly, allows the reconstitution of language and alternative ways of being in and through ludic and other possibilities of the everyday. While metrolingualism may at times be playful boundary breaking, there is also serious business at work here in terms of language and identity politics, of the queering of linguistic practices and thus what it is possible to be, do and say. And when metrolinguals confront their static nemesis, the fixed identity regulations of institutional modernity, there are very significant battles to be fought: When judgements in law courts, educational systems, asylum tribunals, job interviews or hospital waiting rooms are brought to bear on metrolingual language use, the full discriminatory apparatus of the state all too often works against such fluidity.

The metro of metrolingualism draws on the idea of the city for its inspiration but is by no means limited to it. The idea of the city as a contemporary space of mixed language
use is more important than the city itself, and indeed we extend the notion to both urban and rural contexts. Such an interpretation is intended to avoid the pluralisation of languages and cultures as the necessary description of diversity, and to accommodate the complex ways in which fluid and fixed practices reconstitute language and identities. Metrolingualism also takes up a number of the central themes in recent thinking about language in terms of ideologies, practices, resources, and repertoires: a focus on language ideologies (Blommaert, 1999; Seargeant, 2009) provides an understanding of the ways in which languages need to be understood in terms of the local perspectives of the users, and the different struggles to represent language in one way or another; an understanding of language as a practice (Heller, 2007; Pennycook, 2010) allows for a view that language is not an entity used in different contexts but rather is an emergent property of various social practices: bilingualism is ‘a sociopolitical semiotic nexus of praxis cum ideology’ (Tsitsipis, 2007, p. 277; Blackledge and Creese, 2008); an appreciation of language practices as drawing on semiotic resources and repertoires suggests that language knowledge should be defined ‘not in terms of abstract system components but as communicative repertoires – conventionalized constellations of semiotic resources for taking action – that are shaped by the particular practices in which individuals engage’ (Hall, Cheng and Carlson, 2006, p. 232). Like particular feminist orientations to language (Cameron, 2005), the focus here is not on languages as systems but on the deeply embedded social practices of language. Metrolingualism is not, therefore, playful language use devoid of social context so much as a way of describing diverse grounded local practices.

More generally, as can be seen, such ideas are responsive to a number of shifts in thinking about language, which in turn need to be understood in relation to the various ‘turns’ in the social sciences. While there is good reason to be sceptical about all such claims to a new turn, they nevertheless reflect certain shifts in current thought. One such is the ‘practices turn’. As Schatzki (2001, p. 1) explains, while social theorists once talked in terms of ‘“systems”, “meaning”, “life world”, “events”, and “actions” when naming the primary generic social thing’, it is now common to talk in terms of ‘practices’. Taking this seriously in relation to language (Pennycook, 2010) shifts the focus from system and discourse to the doing of language. A second important turn has been the ‘spatial’ (Massey, 1994; Soja, 1989; Gulson and Symes, 2007). Recent thought on space has sought to move beyond the remnants of a Kantian version of space as fixed and immutable towards space that also encompasses a notion of time and change, space as process. From this point of view, we can look at ‘practice as an activity creating time-space not time-space as some matrix within which activity occurs’ (Crang, 2001, p. 187). Space (place, location, context) is not therefore a backcloth on which events and language are projected.
through time. Rather, language practices are activities that produce time and space. Thrift’s (2007) non-representational theory, which he glosses as ‘the geography of what happens’ (p. 2) thus focuses on space, movement and practices, and gives us a way to think about a geography of linguistic happenings, drawing attention to locality (a geography of social space) and language practices (what happens through language).

Other important turns include the somatic (Shusterman, 2000), the sensory (Geurts, 2002), the postmodern (Cameron, 2005), the ecological (Fettes, 2003), and the decolonial (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Taken together these turns all move the focus away from language as an autonomous system that pre-exists its use, and competence as an internal capacity that accounts for language production, towards an understanding of language as a product of the embodied (somatic, sensory), contextualized (ecological, spatial) and political (decolonial) social practices that bring it about. All come in the wake of poststructuralist/postmodern emphases on the constructedness of social life: all emphasize that we cannot take language, the body, the environment, space as given entities with evident meanings. They thus also align themselves closely with the ideas emerging from a turn towards practices, and indeed it is common to talk in terms, for example, of ‘spatial practices’. Rather than seeing language as an object in itself, all these emerging orientations locate language as something done in a particular time and space. It is in order to capture some of these dynamics that we have been talking in terms of metrolingualism rather than the pluralised language entities that have long held sway in applied linguistics.

**CONCLUSION**

As many other contributors to this discussion have attested, applied linguistics in Australia has a lot going for it. Linguistic work in Australia has often had a social and political dimension, and we have not been forced to spend too much of our time seeking space between the nativist or cognitivist emphases elsewhere. It has long had an interest in languages other than English and language education for languages other than English. And yet, it faces several challenges: the first is the social and political challenge of responding to the changing political landscape and getting much better at being heard. With citizenship tests, asylum seekers, refugees, disappearing indigenous languages, a new focus on Asian languages, changing technologies and shifting populations, there is much for us to take up and an urgent need to address a broader audience. The second challenge is one of isolation: We can celebrate or worry about applied linguistics in Australia, but unless we are also busily part of everything else that is going on in the
world, our work may not have the greater impact it should. The final challenge has to do with the epistemological concerns outlined above: Unless we constantly challenge our thinking about language, linguistics and applied linguistics, we run the danger of reproducing precisely those language ideologies we need to be opposing. These are all important challenges for applied linguistics over the next few decades.

Critical and alternative directions for applied linguistics, then, could encompass a renewal of thinking about language that moves away from the continuing emphasis on structure and system and instead embraces a notion of practice (Pennycook, 2010). Such a shift encourages several important developments: By making a notion of language as a local practice central to our activity we can overcome the tired debates about linguistics applied and applied linguistics, and the problematic notion of applying linguistic theory to contexts of practice. Once we grasp that language is a practice itself, we are no longer reliant on linguistic theory that has not been developed with worldly language activity in mind, and instead can start to see applied linguistics as working at the cutting edge of an understanding of language as used in everyday contexts of workplaces, classrooms, courtrooms, asylum seeker tribunals, medical encounters, shopping centres, popular cultural interactions, and much more. By taking the idea of the local seriously, we can move towards a far better appreciation of language ideologies, of local understandings of language, of the ways in which participants themselves orient towards language. We can also start to develop more sophisticated geographies of linguistic happenings, which take us beyond the idea of language use in context and instead operate with a more dynamic understanding of the construction of place and language together. And finally, we can orient towards a form of politics that is grounded in local language activity rather than being reliant on the grand sweeping gestures of imperialism, language rights and globalization. These, I believe, are the critical directions for renewal in applied linguistics in Australia.
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<th>Domains</th>
<th>Key works / authors</th>
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<tr>
<td>Critical discourse analysis</td>
<td>Fairclough, N. (1995). <em>Critical discourse analysis</em>. London: Longman.</td>
<td>CDA 'aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power' (Fairclough, 1995, p. 132).</td>
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<td>Critical language awareness</td>
<td>Fairclough (Ed.). (1992). <em>Critical language awareness</em>. London: Longman</td>
<td>'People cannot be effective citizens in a democratic society if their education cuts them off from critical consciousness of key elements within their physical or social environment. If we are committed to education establishing resources for citizenship, critical awareness of the language practices of one's speech community is an entitlement' (Fairclough, 1992, p. 6).</td>
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<td>Critical approaches to</td>
<td>Venuti, L. (1997). <em>The scandals of translation: Towards an ethics of difference</em>. London: Routledge</td>
<td>'To shake the regime of English, a translator must be strategic both in selecting foreign texts and in developing discourses to translate them. Foreign texts can be chosen to redress patterns of unequal cultural exchange and to restore foreign literatures excluded by the standard dialect, by literary canons, or by ethnic stereotypes' (Venuti, 1997, pp. 10–11).</td>
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<td>Critical approaches to second language education</td>
<td>Canagarajah, S. (1999) <em>Resisting linguistic imperialism in English teaching</em>. Oxford: Oxford University press Norton, B. (2000). <em>Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change</em>. Harlow: Longman/Pearson.</td>
<td>‘It is important to understand the extent to which classroom resistance may play a significant role in larger transformations in the social sphere’ (Canagarajah, 1999, p.196) We need a ‘concept of the language learner as having a complex social identity that must be understood with reference to large and frequently inequitable social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interactions’ (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 579).</td>
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<td><em>Critical pedagogies and language learning.</em> Cambridge: Cambridge University Press</td>
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<td>Critical English for academic</td>
<td>Benesch, S. (2001) *Critical English for academic purposes: Theory, politics, and</td>
<td>‘The overarching goal of critical EAP is to help students perform well in their academic courses while encouraging them to question and shape the education they are being offered’ (Benesch, 2001, p. xvii)</td>
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<td>purposes</td>
<td>practice.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.</td>
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<td>Critical bilingualism</td>
<td>Walsh, C. (1991). *Pedagogy and the struggle for voice: Issues of language, power,</td>
<td>Critical bilingualism implies ‘the ability to not just speak two languages, but to be conscious of the sociocultural, political, and ideological contexts in which the languages (and therefore the speakers) are positioned and function, and the multiple meanings that are fostered in each’ (Walsh, 1991, p. 127)</td>
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<td>and schooling for Puerto Ricans.* Toronto: OISE Press.</td>
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<td>Critical multiculturalism</td>
<td>Kubota, R. (2004). <em>Critical multiculturalism and second language education.</em> In B.</td>
<td>Critical multiculturalism ‘critically examines how inequality and injustice are produced and perpetuated in relation to power and privilege’ (p. 37) exploring ‘a critical understanding of culture’ (p. 38), and involving all students in critical inquiry into how taken-for-granted knowledge, such as history, geography, and lives of other people, is produced, legitimated, and contested in power struggles’ (Kubota, 2004, p. 40).</td>
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<td>Norton and K Toohey (Eds), <em>Critical pedagogies and language learning.</em> Cambridge:</td>
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<td>Cambridge University Press, pp. 30-52.</td>
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Table 16.1 continued Domains of critical applied linguistics
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<td>Critical classroom discourse analysis</td>
<td>Kumaravadiivelu, B. (1999). <em>Critical classroom discourse analysis</em>. <em>TESOL Quarterly</em>, 33(3), 453–484.</td>
<td>Critical classroom discourse analysis draws on critical ethnography as a research tool, has ‘a transformative function’ and ‘seeks to play a reflective role, enabling practitioners to reflect on and cope with sociocultural and sociopolitical structures that directly or indirectly shape the character and content of classroom discourse’ (Kumaravadiivelu, 1999, p. 473).</td>
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<td>Critical language testing</td>
<td>Shohamy, E. (2001). <em>The power of tests: A critical perspective on the uses of language tests</em>. London: Longman</td>
<td>CLT ‘implies the need to develop critical strategies to examine the uses and consequences of tests, to monitor their power, minimize their detrimental force, reveal the misuses, and empower the test takers’ (Shohamy, 2001, p. 131).</td>
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<td>Critical applied linguistics</td>
<td>Pennycook, A. (2001). <em>Critical applied linguistics: a critical introduction</em>. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum</td>
<td>‘Critical applied linguistics … is more than just a critical dimension added on to applied linguistics: It involves a constant scepticism, a constant questioning of the normative assumptions of applied linguistics. It demands a restive problematization of the givens of applied linguistics, and presents a way of doing applied linguistics that seeks to connect it to questions of gender, class, sexuality, race, ethnicity, culture, identity, politics, ideology and discourse’. (Pennycook, 2001, p. 10).</td>
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