

Social Justice in Language Education: Taking Action

Albert Biel and Fabian Maria Esleben, Eds.

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The editors of this volume start by stating that, as language teaching is a political act that cannot be separated from context, a renewed focus on acting for social justice in language education is necessary to face many of the crises in the world today. To this end, this volume contains 15 papers drawn from the 2022 “Taking Action” conference held in Dortmund. In these papers the authors describe a variety of social justice issues related to language education and language policy in education from their teaching or research contexts, with a focus on action rather than theory.

Part 1 consists of four chapters which set the scope for the rest of the book. Chapter 1 (Blume & Gerlach) demonstrates a need for socially just action by focusing on two aspects of ELT in German contexts: the experiences of neurodivergent learners and the role of teacher-training. The interview of L. J. Randolph Jr. and Stacey Margarita Johnson by Albert Biel in Chapter 2 introduces interpretations of the key terms *social justice*, *transformative learning*, *representation*, and *reflection*. In Chapter 3, Highet reflects on her role working with a Delhi-based NGO to investigate what is meant by and who benefits from action. Chapter 4 (Kong & Wang) describes research carried out with teachers of languages other than English and discusses the agency they feel they have in acting for social justice.

Part 2 is titled “Looking at Language(s) in Social Justice Language Education”. The duoethnography in Chapter 5, written by the mother and daughter pairing of Wicaksono & Wicaksono, describes a series of critical incidents in the professional lives of the English teaching authors and is bravely presented as “a chapter about the socially (un)just educational practices that we have participated in” (p. 95). The authors look at ontologies of English and ask how they, as teachers, are implicated in potentially limiting conceptualizations of English through practices such as labeling students as learners rather than users or by setting ‘native’ English as the standard to which they aspire. This chapter also includes some thought-provoking guiding questions for teachers to ask themselves about their own journeys. Chapter 6 (Guarda & Mayr) presents some conclusions from the COMPASS project, which advocates for more equitable plurilingual education through a 2-year

professional development program in the linguistically diverse Italian region of Bolzano-South Tyrol. This chapter has a great deal to recommend it, though I question the authors' uses of the term 'translanguaging', as the cases they describe seem to be focused on the use of multiple discreet languages rather than language as single resource. Chapter 7 (Erling & Foltz) is about improving learning outcomes for students in linguistically diverse middle schools in Austria, as students at these schools often lag behind their peers from less diverse schools.

The papers in Part 3 are grouped around the theme of content, and each touches upon a different battleground. Five propositions for the queering of ELT to further LGBTIQ+ inclusion are the focus of Chapter 8 (Merse). Güllü and Lüke's paper in Chapter 9 is the first that I have read on anti-fatness as a social justice issue in language education. Likewise, I was heartened to see sustainability presented as a social justice issue in Chapter 10 (Römhild). The inclusion of these topics expands the usual scope of social justice issues in a language related volume and is a positive aspect of this book. These chapters include teaching ideas for ELT teachers wishing to approach these topics, and they may also be good resources for university teachers writing rationales for language courses touching on these issues.

Part 4 continues with reflections on social justice projects carried out in language classes. A task-based learning activity on the topic of jobs, taught in plurilingual and pluricultural classrooms in Germany, is described in Chapter 11 by Berg and Blume, while Pérez et al. describe the creation of socially-just and locally-responsive classroom materials by English teachers in Colombia in Chapter 12. A large part of this chapter is given over to a description of the materials which, while interesting, left me wanting to know more about the decision-making processes involved in their creation. In Chapter 13, Collissi describes a podcasting project he carried out as a trainee teacher. Collissi discusses not only the creation of the podcast, focused on raising awareness of discrimination and privilege in Germany, but also the impact that the interviews had on his own journey. Chapter 14 (Kansy et al.) returns to the initial conference that inspired the book and contains reflections from four of the student organisers. The volume concludes with a chapter by Staunton that recaps the preceding papers and discusses the theories of social justice that inform them.

A major feature of this text is its variety. Interviews rub shoulders with duoethnography, reflective narratives with empirical research. Many issues are covered. As well as the expected linguisticism and racism, lesser discussed topics such as wealth inequality, water-access, and anti-fatness also appear.

There are voices from outside of the usual UK/US axis, with the German context well represented alongside contributions from Colombia, Italy, and Austria. It is also notable that the authors include academics, teacher trainers, and teachers of varying lengths of experience – from those still in training to those who have taught for many decades. Many of their reflections express an endearing honesty in discussing past mistakes and missteps. Another strength is that these voices are not all describing English language education, although as the conference that these papers came from was organised by the participants on an English teacher training program, there is an imbalance towards English that is especially obvious in Part 3. A final positive point is the strong focus on action, not only in Part 4, but throughout the book. Chapter 6, for example, describes not only the COMPASS program but some of the actions taken by teacher participants. There are numerous examples in this volume to inspire readers to take action themselves.

That said, the focus on action does come somewhat at the detriment of theory. The first chapter makes an argument for the term “social justice” having a focus on equitable sharing, but having no commonly agreed definition. However, discussion of the term is not developed until the concluding chapter when the social justice philosophies of Rawls, Sen, and Fraser are summarized with reference to the preceding chapters. This means that at times some of the chapters feel slightly unmoored, as the authors assume a commonly held theory of social justice that the reader may not, in fact, share.

Despite this, this volume would make a good addition to the shelf of any language teacher or researcher interested in acting on social justice issues.

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