The Critical Language Awareness Impact on Language Variation

Ahlam Alfouaim
The ideology of Critical Language Awareness is an integral part of any successful language education system. This area of specialization has played an important role in the development of sociolinguistics study. CLA expands substantially over a wide range of factors including language acquisition and variety, as well as human identity factors. Before diving into critical language awareness studies and its wide practices, the definition of CLA, according to Fiarcough, includes “how language conventions and language practices are invested with power relations and ideological process which people are often unaware of” (205). That is, language is not only a mean of communication. Rather, it is always associated with other factors people are not usually aware of such as power, class, gender, race and sexuality.

People may wonder about the need to raise awareness on the importance of CLA as an essential component of any successful second language education system. Its importance arises from the need to “develop an understanding of and respect the diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups...” (215). It is also critical to expose teachers and educators to these kinds of varieties because they are the “agents of change.” language educators who are armed with CLA knowledge are capable to change the conventional ideology that proposes the superiority of one language over another for any reason. In this essay, I am going to examine the role of the Critical Language Awareness ideology in terms of dialects and language variation.

In the book *Sociolinguistic and Language Education*, the author discusses the language of those who are in power that “tends to be labeled as ‘standard’, ’official,’ appropriate’, ’normal’
and so on”(209). Because language is part of one’s identity, such biased classification of languages may have a negative impact on other languages, cultures and identities. This form of prejudice can lead to discrimination against those who speak another ‘variety’ of the language. A great example of these language varieties is ‘pidgins and creoles,’ which developed from the direct contact between people who speak different languages and who need to communicate with each other. P/Cs are usually used for informal contexts, they also emerged from “the colonial language that has been chosen as the official language even after independence” (236). The common misconception about P/C is that they are ‘corrupted’ forms from the ‘lexifiers’, the official languages being spoken. P/C speakers are stigmatized as uneducated people speaking a language that doesn’t have an official writing system or a rich literary history and so on.

Critical language awareness, which promotes mutual understanding and respect among language varieties, plays a critical role in standardizing such language variety and regional dialects. In the past, students who speak a dialect or a language variety are not allowed to express themselves in class with their own identity, their native dialect. Rather, they are forced to speak the ‘legitimate’ language of their particular country. With the language awareness programs students’ P/Cs “are seen as a resource to be used for learning the standard, rather than an impediment”(250). These awareness programs and pedagogies promoted the idea of embracing ones’ identities and our distinct language varieties. In other words, after the application of such awareness programs, P/C speakers started learning about their dialects’ history and politics, the differences and similarities between the P/Cs and the official language, and the features or each language. Eventually, the perception of P/Cs as a defect that cannot be used in education is no longer adopted. Most importantly, bilingual/multilingual students are able
to freely express themselves as equal social entities that have a good grasp of their own standard language and a high level of linguistic self-respect (251).

Because students learn best when their own identity and language are valued, critical language awareness ideology is better be employed in second language educational programs. The book discusses some vital insights on how to achieve CLA in any ESL curriculum, one of which includes “engaging students in critical language research relating to popular culture” which will “connect meaningfully with local contexts by viewing local cultures and language practices as powerful resources for learning” (214). This kind of connection will build the students’ cognitive understanding of language varieties such as Black English, Asian English, and P/Cs, etc. Also, it will positively introduce the term linguistic diversity that will stimulate the students to question their common beliefs about what makes a language better than the other.

Students from various backgrounds including ESL learners, bilingual or multilingual speakers will greatly benefit from implementing awareness programs in the process of learning a second language. Applying CLA approach in ESL teaching will result in “greater cognitive development, increased motivation and self-esteem and ability to separate codes and notice differences” (252). Considering students’ language varieties will reduce anxiety and will create a flexible learning environment for a better, productive learning experience. Moreover, students will be more likely to separate codes, i.e., if we look at P/Cs spoken in a given country as a code and the official/second language as another code, those students who have been exposed to awareness programs can make a smooth transition between the two languages. Not only they can code switch, but they can also identify the similarities, characteristics and differences between these languages, which is a great privilege for any bilingual speaker to acquire.
“As sociolinguistics and educators, we must do more than study the relationships between language, society and power—we must do what we can do to change them” (228). As a future ESL educator, the rule of spreading a critical awareness will be part of my overall and ultimate goal. Regardless of the curriculum that might not be as flexible as I aspire, I will include these critical sociolinguistic elements in my lesson planning. And because I believe that with every privilege comes responsibility, reflecting the idea of the equal value of languages will give the students the privileges to build their own ‘critical view,’ and ultimately, shape their sense of self and identity in the larger world.
Works Cited

H. Hornberger, Nancy and Lee McKay, Sandra. Sociolinguistics and Language Education.