# Reflections on critical applied linguistics: A conversation with Alastair Pennycook[1]

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ABSTRACT

During the *I International Congress of Critical Applied Linguistics* (ICCAL) – held in Brasilia-DF/Brazil from 19 to 21 October, 2015 – Alastair Pennycook (University of Technology, Sidney) gave the event's opening lecture entitled "Critical Applied Linguistic Challenges." Widely known for his work on critical approaches to language education and applied linguistics, he generously accepted our request to talk about this issue. In the year that his book *Critical applied linguistics: a critical introduction* completes 15 years of publication, it is an honor for us to publish our conversation.

KEYWORDS: Critical applied linguistics, language teaching, teacher education, language.

**PESSOA**: We're very pleased to be able to interview you because we have been working with critical language teaching and critical language teacher education since 2005. Your book [PENNYCOOK, 2001][2] has been very relevant to our work and we know that you don't like it anymore, but anyway…

**PENNYCOOK**: Did I say that?

**PESSOA**: You said that in Campo Grande [*XI Congresso Brasileiro de Linguística Aplicada*, 2015] [laughter], but we still like it. In the discussion we had this morning, you said that critical is not necessary

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anymore, and you mentioned critical pedagogy, but we believe that in critical language teaching and critical language teacher education, it's still necessary, and we say that because a lot of teachers in Brazil are still focusing on the language system.

PENNYCOOK: Yes.

PESSOA: And when they talk about themes, they hardly ever talk about inequality. They usually talk about trivial things, so we believe it's still very important.

PENNYCOOK: I agree, and I'm not saying at all that we shouldn't be doing critical work, but I'm worried about what the term *critical* comes to mean. So my question is: "What work does it now do?" We did have a lot of success with that in Australia. I say we, but it wasn't my work. There was a very strong group at that time and they really pushed critical literacy into the schools, in ways that were quite surprising. Allan Luke was a very strong part of that group. We had a conference around 1996…

SILVESTRE: The New London Group?

PENNYCOOK: It was before the New London Group was actually formed – the same people but before they had their meeting in New London. We were at a conference on critical literacy and I remember this American guy asking Allan Luke: "What do you see as essential to critical literacy?", and Allan said: "Critique of capital", and this guy said: "Are you serious? Are you seriously trying to do this in all state schools?" [laughter]. And Allan said: "What else are you going to do? Shouldn't the basis of education be a critique of capital?" And they did argue this, and it was great, but I had this dilemma. I was asking this problematic question on what *critical* means, because the moment it gets fixed and everyone starts doing it: "okay, here's the critical curriculum, and we're all going to critique capital", it doesn't work. It's the problem that *critical* gets worn out. But I think you're right: there are lots of areas where it's still necessary, and critical language education and critical teacher education are still slow to make any progress, aren't they?

PESSOA: Yeah, but here's the first question: after 15 years of the publication of the book *Critical applied linguistics*, which introduced a new perspective in applied linguistics, how do you see it?

**Pennycook**: I wish I'd done it a bit differently. I called it an introduction and then some people said: "That's not an introduction!" It's too difficult and I was struggling with how to both present the field and argue for a position. It took a lot of thinking: "How do you organize this? How do you steer a path?" I would try and do it very differently now. Clearly it's been useful for a lot of people because it does lay out the different positions on pedagogy, on text, and on discourse analysis. I don't want to disown that book at all, but I should have done it better. I think it's a bit heavy. Certainly, I don't think it works very well as a text for students, but it seems it's been a useful resource book for teachers and teacher educators. And it's a shame because if I'd done it better, that might have been possible. They asked me whether I wanted to do a revised version, but I haven't found the time.

**Pessoa**: We like the chapters *Politics of pedagogy* and *Politics of difference*, and we work with them in the postgraduate level.

**Pennycook**: Yeah, postgraduate can work, but other students don't always love those texts.

**Pessoa**: Yeah, but we like them a lot [laughter].

**Pennycook**: Yeah, if you can find a way of working with them…

**Pessoa**: Yes, for us it's been very useful.

**Silvestre**: Can you tell us about your experience with language teaching and language teacher education?

**Pennycook**: These days I'm mainly teaching graduate students. It's an MA TESOL/ Applied Linguistics program, and the huge majority of people are training to become teachers. I teach a class in that course called *Global Englishes*, which is about the global spread of English and varieties of English. Part of what I try to do in that is to unsettle the students, which they don't always like, to make people feel a bit uncomfortable – it doesn't sound good as a goal – to make people question what they're involved in when teaching English. You can't just get focused on grammar alone anymore and say: "I'm just an English teacher." There's no such thing as "just an English teacher", so what are we involved in? So the students do go through a bit of a crisis saying: "Maybe I should give up, maybe I should drop out. We shouldn't be doing our Masters' in TESOL." No, the point is: "How do we do it and how do we get more aware of what the issues are?" I'd rather we had

more aware teachers than people leaving. So, it's teacher education in a broad sense, but I don't get too involved in classes which are more about teaching practices.

SILVESTRE: Practicum?

PENNYCOOK: Yeah, we have the practicum. There's that whole paper I wrote on the *praxicum* [PENNYCOOK, 2004, 2012].

PESSOA & SILVESTRE: Yes, we love that text [laughter].

PENNYCOOK: And I've done that for quite a long time, that kind of work on the TESOL Masters' degree. So, it's a teacher education, but not usually in that more practical level, on how to teach. And my colleagues always say: "Come on, you should come and do that!" But I like doing the more general stuff. And I was a teacher for quite a long time. I taught English. I have taught other languages here and there, but I taught mainly English. My first degree was actually in Modern Languages: French and German. Then, I didn't know what to do, and I wanted to travel and leave and do anything. I did a quick qualification as an English teacher and I got a bit of work in the U.K. The first real job was in Japan. I just saw a job and I went to Japan for two, three years. And then I went to Canada and did a Masters'. Then I was sort of stuck and I thought: "I really like doing this, I want to go and teach again." So I went to China and taught for 3 years in China.

PESSOA: Did you teach English?

PENNYCOOK: Yeah, it was a university. We did have some Masters students who were doing linguistics, applied linguistics, but most of the work was English teaching in different levels from conversation to reading. And I had fun doing that.

PESSOA: Did you teach critically?

PENNYCOOK: That's a good question [laughter]. It was really before I developed those ideas. This was back in the 1980's. I think when I was in Japan, I was new and we were trying to find different ways of doing communicative stuff. It was not critical in the way that I'm talking about now. After I left China, I did my PhD in Toronto. That's when I met Critical Pedagogy, and I was like "oh, okay. Ha!" And we were in this group of graduate students: Bonny Norton turned up in the same class and Brian Morgan, Ryuko Kubota, Angel Lin… It was that particular group and we were all developing critical this

and critical that. In China, I was trying to do stuff without having a particular awareness of it. I was actually trying to get the Chinese student's awareness of…, in a sense it was like a critique of the West. Because it was at a time when there was the early open door policy under Deng Xiaoping and the idea that China should learn from the West. And there was a group of us thinking: "Careful! Be very careful with the West!" There was obviously this odd mix, and we would say: "Stick with communism!" [laughter]. We actually lived near where Mao Tse Tung was born and we were kind of the old Maoists. That's what interested me: this disjuncture between academic and political work that I think is very common. Since I was teaching linguistics there and I was teaching standard stuff, I wasn't really questioning it. Then I had a whole different political side that was engaged in other ways. It was when I went and started my Doctorate and read about post-structuralism and so on: "Oh, you could put these two things together!" Then that started to make sense. I think that a lot of other people found that useful, because teaching English and Linguistics is one part of your life and then you say: "I'm an activist, I've got political views"; but they don't connect. Actually, these can work together. Once you find those traditions and theories that can make it work together, it's kind of liberating. So, it's an interesting question how critical my background was. I think it was mixed.

PESSOA: In your article *Critical and alternative directions in applied linguistics* [PENNYCOOK, 2010a, p. 16.1], you argue that the term critical "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." Do you think that this argument also applies to the area of language education in general or to the contexts you are familiar with?

PENNYCOOK: Right. I think it is embedded in critical discourse analysis, critical literacy… They've got quite long traditions now. And there are questions, at times, about what the critical starts to mean, particularly in literacy; in a sense it's starting, at least for us, to become the norm: "Yeah, of course we're doing critical!" And there's often that confusion, too, I mean, the term *critical* is broad. The critical that we have tried to embed in critical applied linguistics and critical literacy is

coming out of the history of strong political work from critical theory in the Frankfurt School and other figures like Paulo Freire. I think the problem is that you've also got the area of literary criticism, that notion of *critique,* which means *being critical*: "don't be so critical!" And also *criticism,* which means just *being objective,* and that links it to critical thinking. And all that gets tied up, and I say: "That's all so different!" But I think the problem is when you get *that* label, because when you do critical literacy that stuff comes back in. I just did a search online on critical literacy and you see that stuff: "That's critical thinking!" That's a critical thinking book for young kids in school, so it's dressed up as critical literacy, but it's not really what I would call *critical literacy*, so it's got quite embedded; there's always the potential it would lose its strength. But that also depends on where you are. It happens differently in different places. In Australia, we were lucky in a way, because Australia is not very big in terms of population and various people were able to have quite a strong influence. Allan Luke became Deputy Director of Education in Queensland, or something like that. He became a bureaucrat for one or two years and redesigned the curriculum. He was actually able to implement a radical curriculum based on critical literacy in the state schools. So, in a place like that, particularly in the 1990's, there was this strong influence and change, but that's also got lost. I think the term maybe got a bit saturated, but I think in other parts of the world it hasn't happened at all. And we don't really know what to do with the term *critical*. I thought at first: "Oh, there are so many people coming to this conference [*I International Conference of Critical Applied Linguistics*]! Wow, it's got bigger than I thought." But, actually, what people are saying is: "What is this?" They're very interested. But for a lot of people coming to this event: "We just want to find out what it means", right? And you say: "Okay, it's not saturated, it's not embedded, it's new." So, I think, as you're saying, an area like critical teacher education, we need to be doing that. If *critical* is the best term, it probably works better than most, right? And I think we need to get that on the agenda. Because the trouble is that teacher education is bound up with state governments and that always makes it harder to do this work, right? Because people say: "We don't want it; state education is not about questioning the role of the state!" So, you've got to present

the critical as a good thing and not say: "Well, it's *actually* questioning the role of the state!"

Silvestre: "Critical work is dangerous work" [Pennycook, 2001, p. 138].

Pennycook: Yeah. Look, we have to acknowledge that actually it is. If you're taking it seriously, you're seriously challenging stuff. And then you do have to work politically, I think, strategically at times. If you say: "No, I've got to stick to this version", you may not get anywhere. You've got to think "Okay, what's going to work? How far can we go?" – particularly if you're at a state school. You have to operate with a lot of pragmatic constraints. I think the critical needs to be part of teacher education and it's so often not. And it gets so tied up with the bureaucracy of schooling and the modes of schooling; we still have courses on how to use the white board. And you think: "Yeah, okay, how to use the white board, overhead transparencies; all of these matter, but can we have a slightly stronger agenda here for a change?" Also, we're more aware of the diversity of kids in schools and all of that, so I think we do need the critical.

Pessoa: Yes. So, you said there is a critical curriculum policy there…

Pennycook: Well, it sort of was.

Pessoa: There was…

Silvestre: In the 1990's.

Pessoa: But has it been applied in Australia in all contexts?

Pennycook: It sort of became very common for people to say: "I'm doing critical literacy", but I think as it became very common, it became weaker. And so, what that meant became less and less and we got very stuck into a curriculum. I think it's not really critical anymore, but people say they want to do it. Of course, critical literacy is good. Also, there are a lot of tensions to it. Not everyone shared the same view of what the critical was. So, in the early work, a lot of it drew on the old systemic functional work on genre and its idea of teaching the genres of power to the disadvantaged. And that became a driving force for some of it, and it actually started to look rather like a sort of transmissive form of education that wasn't acknowledging diversity. So, it was kind of split. And I think the more conservative part of that is

still going, and really what they're doing is promoting genre education, teaching fixed text types, rather than doing any kind of critical literacy.

**Pessoa**: Yes, here in Brazil there is a lot of work on text genre, different types of texts, but it's not necessarily critical.

**Pennycook**: Yeah, I mean that's the problem. The original arguments were that too much of the writing in schools was based on an idea: "Write about yourself, tell us a story." It was a kind of expressivist writing. The argument was that the kids of middle class background had the tools to do different kinds of writing, but unless people were explicitly taught in a particular area, they could not do it; they had to learn to write different kinds of texts; and actually what people need to know is how to do a range of things: how to write a report, all these different genres. I think in that way it's been very useful, but the problem is that the original focus on disadvantaged kids has shifted. Jim Martin had a great example from years ago, where a teacher had said "write a story" and this kid had written this whole thing about the development of planets and it was quite good science and the teacher went: "Not a story!" Well, you might want to engage with what this kid has written. The ideas were quite strongly grounded in a critical position originally, but then it became stuck with the idea of teaching these different types of genres; it's more useful than some of the other work that is going on; but whether it's critical in any other way I think is questionable.

**Silvestre**: So, how can language teachers make use of the concept of language as a local practice in their teaching?

**Pennycook**: Yes, there are several different ideas going on in that, language as a local practice, and what it is trying to do is part of that larger questioning of the idea of what language is, right? And it links to *translanguaging* and so on. We need to question those ideas. I just always liked that question of Ofelia García: "What would language education look like if we no longer posited the existence of separate languages?" And as a language educator, I think that is a fundamentally good, difficult question. So, that book [Pennycook, 2010b] is working at a level of abstraction around that, but it's also arguing for the need to take practice very seriously. The role of theory around practice is really about an important way of thinking sociologically at a level that's above a level of simple action, but below the macro ideas of general

broader views of society. So practice is what people do, so that gives you a grounded way of thinking about language as an activity, and that moves you away from thinking about language as a system. And it's not that grammar doesn't matter, but if you start the idea of language as a practice, you can start to say: "No, actually, language *does* stuff." Language is the stuff we *do* and the system that we call grammar comes out of that. It's not *the* preexisting definition of what a language is. Of course, grammar matters, but we need to think from a different perspective. And then the idea of the local is really to take ideas of place and locality seriously and say that everything happens in places. We can talk about learning a language as a kind of an abstract system, but really what happens is people using – actually, I don't like to talk about people using language because it implies that language is used. So, I would say that you engage or that you work with language as a local practice: what are people doing with language, how and what's it for? So, it switches the focus onto activity and away from the system, which doesn't mean aspects of linguistic systems don't exist, don't matter, but when people say that languages have rules…, actually, languages don't have rules, people have rules. And I think linguists have been very guilty of this, in a sense of implying that languages have rules. So, yes, they have those things that happen systematically and the idea of practices helps to show that. It's basically saying people do stuff over and over in similar ways and that gives us the impression that it's sort of fixed or systematic, but it can always change. People come to my Global Englishes class very secure in the idea that there's a thing called English and it's got these rules, and this is how it works and my job is to teach people, and I try to say: "Let's pull that part a bit and think about why are these traditions of using it in a particular way? Who put them there? How can they be different?" You start to think about that and people start to say: "So, actually, people made up these rules. It's not English, it's users of a particular power who insist on this as being correct or incorrect", but there is nothing inherent to that being so. Once you start to think about language differently, you can start to say: "Okay, we can be a bit freer with this." It doesn't answer the other questions that we still have exams and those norms are still there, but it can mean you can start to question those assumptions. I think it's very embedded the idea that language is

a fixed system with rules and our job is to teach people those rules. It's the same point I was trying to make with Christian Chun's work. He says we still have to teach English for academic purposes, but we can question the way that works and question how we're going to do that and so on. I need to give them the goods, but I need to give them the power to question how that works. And that's the set-up, I think. So, I think language as a local practice works on a level of abstraction and is not easily translatable into language teaching. I didn't write it really as a kind of language teaching book, but I think people can think: that's true, you can see other ways of talking and thinking and doing language.

**PESSOA**: Yes, and I think that's what we should do in class. Instead of teaching grammar, we should teach students how to negotiate meaning in a language. Meaning is not in the words, it's always negotiated. But it's not very easy to do this. Well, we try to do this but people say: "What about language?" Well, we're talking about sexual identities and race in class and language is there. We're using language to talk about these issues, but people are always asking about grammar: "What you're doing in terms of language?"

**PENNYCOOK**: Yeah. That negotiation idea has come up a lot now with the discussion on *lingua franca*. Canagarajah is arguing that it's about negotiation and accommodation. And I've got interested recently in the idea of the way in which we assume that language is about mutual understanding. And I started to think: "Actually, why do we assume that?" [laughter]. I started saying this is about *mutual misunderstanding*, but then I think maybe it was too far. I need to come back a bit.

**PESSOA**: But you're right.

**PENNYCOOK**: But I think it's worth questioning and say: "What are we assuming? That I speak and you understand?" It's much more about negotiating differences.

**PESSOA**: Well, in the text *Thirteen ways of looking at a blackboard* [PENNYCOOK, 2012a, p. 139], you said the "critical pedagogical enterprise […] is about the ethical and political demand to think otherwise […]. It's a question of the unexpected and of becoming Other." How do you think we can make it part of what we do as language teachers? [laughter]. Always language teaching.

PENNYCOOK: Again, it's like going back to those same sorts of questions, right? How do we get better at thinking differently and getting our students to do that? The other chapter in the book, about the sweating cheese [PENNYCOOK, 2012b], which is where I was also trying to think through those things because the example I gave there…

SILVESTRE: *Through others' eyes and thinking otherwise*.

PENNYCOOK: Yeah, *Through others' eyes and thinking otherwise*. I got two versions of that, because I rewrote it. The original idea of that was: "Well, I saw myself through someone else's eyes." I thought: "Okay, I can see why this person is seeing this." And then I thought: "That's a really problematic assumption that I can see myself through his eyes." There are too many assumptions in that and we need to make that more complex. So, in the *Thirteen ways of looking at a blackboard* (my poet friends have never forgiven me for doing that to a great poem) [laughter].

PESSOA: No, it's very poetic. It's a journey.

PENNYCOOK: I found it interesting.

SILVESTRE: We studied the version of 2004.

PENNYCOOK: So, this has changed a bit.

SILVESTRE: It's even better!

PENNYCOOK: So, the idea of *thinking otherwise* comes particularly from Foucault. Foucault is always someone I go back to. I find Foucault's work more approachable than some other work. He works through studies of prisons and sexuality, but he does raise that question of how we think otherwise, because he's looking at the ways in which our thought is governed discursively, and I think in a more complex way than thinking in terms of ideology. So, for me, that became one of the questions that came out of that chapter. There is this idea of the *critical moment* and it goes back to the curriculum problem, when we say: "Okay, I'm going to teach critically. So, I've got this plan, this agenda, this critical approach, this curriculum, and this text, and we're going to read this and discuss that", which can work fine, but the other side of this is when you get those moments when you think: "What do I do now?" And this is a moment when we can say: "Oh, yeah, I've got it." Because when we try to change the way people think a bit, it doesn't always happen by us predeciding how we're going to do that. We've got

to be engaging with where they're at. It's almost like taking up some point of this and saying: "Okay, how about this?" Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. And I think those ideas to me were important and that's why I also say that we need to constantly question to know where that leaves us. We have to be always questioning and questioning what we're doing. It was interesting the discussion this morning, the idea of people being very sure of themselves. It can't be nice to be so confident, right? "Sorry, it's always complex." I'm not sure I want everyone to have to share the difficulty of thinking everything is complex, but I want my students to move towards that idea of thinking otherwise. That's why I always find that very central to the sort of work I want to do. That's why in a lot of these books I push sometimes too far. "What about this?" "Are you serious?" "Okay, maybe that was too much, let's try it." And you never know what people will take up. You try out an idea and a person goes: "No." Another person says: "Okay, that may work. Forget that one, let's try this one."

**Silvestre**: What are the ethical implications of your recent research work?

**Pennycook**: By ethical you don't mean in the narrow sense of research ethics, right?

**Silvestre**: Not in this narrow sense, but in the sense we use in critical applied linguistics.

**Pennycook**: Well, the most recent work we've been doing is around *metrolingualism* and *everyday multilingualism*. That's why the notion of the *everyday* is important, because it is trying to get into "how does this actually work? How do people in multilingual cities actually do stuff?" And so when you're looking at how language works, you need to get into the work place, try to record and transcribe it. It's difficult, right? And the people aren't always very welcoming, as they are busy, but I'm also surprised how we actually manage to get some of these recordings at 4:00 in the morning in a market. One of the big issues for me is the kind of monolingual assumptions we often have. I was listening to a debate, it's usually quite a good debate program on television, and someone quite intelligent said: "If you want to come to Australia, you've got to be able to speak English." And I thought: "What does this mean and why?" And then it gets into all this stuff

about integration. But if you're coming to Australia, whatever you want to do with the idea of integrating, you may be integrating into a Fazi-speaking Muslim community in Western Sydney. You're Muslim, you find out where your particular orientation within the Islamic world is, you find people with similar language, you find similar shops; and there is your integration. You are integrating into Australia and those people who have lived in Australia longer, this kind of Australianness and their particular life worlds. The problem is always on the sort of integration and this weird image of white mainstream Australian life you're going to integrate into. White mainstream Australia doesn't really welcome that integration quite as we imagine: "Oh, let's all have a barbecue, let's get all these guys with their beards over here." It just doesn't work that way. So, what goes on is this multilayered set of people working with each other in markets and shops. It actually works quite well, it's interesting, but you do get flash points and disagreements. One of the things that surprised us was actually how positively people spoke. We were amused at one point; there was a guy we were talking to, of Lebanese background, who has a fruit, nut and coffee and various things shop, and he was saying: "Oh, there's *too many* different people here; there is Vietnamese and Chinese and Lebanese." He listed seven or eight: "There's *too many, too many*." Actually, he doesn't mean *too many*; he means *very many* because they're the same in some languages. And he was very positive about this. He said: "Oh, it's great. I love this suburb and all these people coming to my shop and, because they're Greek, they think I should speak Greek. I wish I should speak Greek but I speak Lebanese Arabic." So, we realized he actually meant *very many*. We were looking at this very multicultured suburb and it's interesting how it works; all these different shops and people from different backgrounds. It's not always smooth, right? And there is a quote I like because it said something like: "We've got them all here, deaf, dumb, blind, stupid, races from all over the world, best place to work." I thought: "What does that mean?" And I thought: "This sort of deaf, dumb, blind and stupid, it doesn't sound nice, right?" But in a way, he's just saying: "We've got everyone from all over the world and I love it." And again this is quite celebratory, even though it doesn't

sound such a positive kind of view. And part of the ethics to me is bringing that out, saying: "This is what goes on, this is how it works."

**Silvestre**: Making these people heard and seen?

**Pennycook**: Yeah, and saying this kind of underbelly of a city like Sydney is fundamentally multilingual. It's going on in schools and we also do a bit of work in the university. There's been quite of work on multilingual universities, which tend to be lectures, but what goes on with *all* the students we have, *all* the language backgrounds? There's a majority of students in our universities speaking English as a second language, and you think: "How does all that work in the everyday? What do you use? What do you read? What do you listen to in your headphones? What's all that?" and "Yes, this is kind of odd. I've got to write my assignment in English. What's going on behind all these languages, discussions and students working?" It's always a mix of languages and people negotiating what to speak and how you do it. I'm not sure about using these terms like *metrolingualism*, but it does get away from the other terminology like *bilingual* and *codeswitching*. We were trying to think differently in a way, trying to relate language to space: "How does the city space, or how do the particular spaces in the city work in terms of how people use language in those places?" The idea of space has become very important for us. So, the ethical is trying to show a different way, partly to the non-linguistic audience. We say: "Look, you've got to understand language here, language is what oils, it's what makes the city. You may think it's the economy; you may think it's the geography, but we will argue it's the language." We all need to work together and try to understand that and to argue with others more about languages, from our understanding of how this works. We need a much more complex vision than saying this *language* or *that language, integration* or *non-integration*. Those terms don't make sense for the complexity and the layers and all that goes on in everyday lives.

**Pessoa**: But do you think this work can help native white Australians to accept these immigrants more? Do you think such a work helps integration?

**Pennycook**: Well, I would hope so. It's always the question in academic work. How do we have those bigger impacts? You hope that people get a different vision of that because, again, part of what we do

is providing these books and texts. We give other people – teachers and students – the opportunity to think about it, discuss it, and maybe change things. We hope it can spread something. In terms of trying to have a more direct effect, I think it's difficult to do that, but we try to argue: "This has implications for urban planning", but I'm not quite sure that it's true.

SILVESTRE: Now, it's the last one.

PESSOA: Yes, you must be tired. So, can you leave a message to Brazilian English teachers and language teacher educators?

PENNYCOOK: Of course [laughter].

PESSOA: It may be difficult because you don't know the context much.

PENNYCOOK: Right, I shouldn't do it because I don't know the context. What would I say? I don't know enough, and I don't want to make assumptions about bits of things people say about English language teaching and so on. I mean, one of the arguments a lot of us have made over time is that if we're involved in English language teaching, we do have to understand that we're never just English teachers. Teaching is always engaged with a broader politics, as part of an education system: the way we treat students and organize our classes, all the stuff we do. People like to have it as just practical stuff in the classroom, but it's much bigger. And English is also never just English. It isn't just a grammatical system. It's linked to a whole set of global relations, so one of the first things I'd say to teachers is: "You've got to grasp that. We can't just hide." It's clear it's the same for other languages. If you're teaching Portuguese as a second language, you can say: "You're never just a teacher, and Portuguese is never just Portuguese." And Portuguese is also a major language and the implications of teaching Portuguese as a second language in Sao Paulo to migrants has a whole of other implications. But English is also a different case at times because of its spread. So, that's an initial starting point for any teachers. And the other stuff is to work with the students towards thinking: "What are we doing? What are we engaged with here? What is the point of this stuff?" Our students in teacher education need to think about English in relation to other languages: "What's going on as we promote English?" In Brazil, where does that sit for indigenous Brazilians in relationship to

the need to learn Portuguese? And then learning English may be really useful because we can connect to other indigenous groups in different parts of the world. And how much room is there for the three languages – indigenous language, Portuguese and English? We need to think about that all the time. But I think that for our students some questioning like: "What is it we want with English? How do we get more critical about it rather than just buying the goods that English seems to offer?" I think people want English understandably, and it's useful, and English is a good tool for being critical, but it's often so much promoted as part of: "You need English in order for Brazil to compete in global markets and therefore your English is oriented towards those pragmatic market goals, because look at the crisis in the economy." "Oh, wait a minute, who decided that's what English is for?" We should change some of those discourses. They're in the global textbooks that promote this kind of flat global image of travel and international prestige, this kind of elite class of English speakers, which everyone wants to join. Maybe we can get a bit more critical about that. English can do some interesting stuff. And we should also get teachers to think: "How much can we challenge here? Who decided these are the norms?" I do hear a lot of people say here: "It's good to send people overseas, to hire native speakers." And I was like: "Should we question that?" Wouldn't it be good to get people to say: "Actually, we don't need those so-called native speakers, or let's think what they can do and what they can't do?" Let's be very careful about what the British Council argues. Let's develop a skepticism about this that isn't necessarily idealistic. We can see quite serious issues here, and let's stop assuming that we should be sending our students abroad or we should be hiring these teachers. Actually there are competent teachers here in the region. Let's think of those before we buy into other ideas. I think it's a matter of confidence, of awareness. I think that second language speakers and teachers have this kind of lack of confidence: "We're not native speakers." So, let's change the discourse: "You're a bilingual speaker. You speak Portuguese and English. So, you've got a whole lot of qualities and advantages, so why might we want to get something else here?" I think challenging some of that could be something.

**PESSOA**: Kumaravadivelu [2012] talks about this *native speaker paradigm*. We should change it, but it's very difficult. But I don't think that in Brazil we hire many native speaker teachers as they do in Asia. Here it's not very common. In my English teacher education course at the university, for example, there are eleven teachers and only one is a foreigner, a native speaker of English. I think I can say that about Brazil in general. For example, the researchers in this Congress, most of them are Brazilians, which is great. But this native speaker ideal is still very embedded in our practices.

**PENNYCOOK**: Yes.

**PESSOA**: Now, this is not a question from the interview, but have you ever been involved in language policies in Australia? I mean, have you ever had posts in the government, as Luke did?

**PENNYCOOK**: No.

**PESSOA**: Not even in discussions about language policies in Australia?

**PENNYCOOK**: I'm not as good strategically as some of those people. A person who was very influential in Australia was Joe Lo Bianco. He wrote the language policy in 1987. It was very forward looking. I mean, it never got fully implemented but it was a very good policy.

**PESSOA**: And do you agree with language policies in Australia?

**PENNYCOOK**: The work that Joe Lo Bianco did was very good. He had a four-pronged strategy. It's basically support for indigenous languages, community languages, foreign language learning and access to English as a second language. He argued that we also need to think about those not only as economic strategies but also as cultural and developmental strategies. It's all good stuff, but the indigenous languages remain a big problem and underfunded and it's also partly because there's a federal system as well as quite strong local provincial state control over education. The Northern Territory backed down and removed bilingual education from the schools, which is a *real* problem. They were saying: "We need to teach English." Sure, teach English but we need to be working in the first language, because in the Northern Territory there is a much larger percentage of first language speakers of indigenous languages. On the other hand, I've been quite surprised that there's been a growth in New South Wales of teaching indigenous

languages in schools. And I want to actually do a bit of work around that because I don't know enough about how and why. I know who's doing it, because I found one school where they have a compulsory indigenous language across the curriculum, and only a small percentage of the kids are indigenous. So, you've got all sorts of different kids learning this language as their first foreign language. Actually, I shouldn't call it a foreign language. That's kind of interesting and is actually growing in some states. Really, I think by and large the old policy was great, but the implementation has been *bad* and it's sort of been cut away. What Joe was arguing for was: "Who are the migrant communities and how can we support first language maintenance?" We used to have this silly stuff like having French and German always as default languages; they're really not relevant. So, foreign language and community language shifted towards Asian languages, but it's been very much economically driven now. So, it's very much: "We need to learn Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian." Part of this is good, they're the neighbors, but it's also a lot because: "We're doing business with them." And there's got to be some other reasons for this. It's nothing to be proud of. Australia's not been good. There's also the problem of being a country that's majority English speaking. If English is the first language for a lot of people, there's often less push to learn other languages: "I can go to Indonesia and speak English. It might be useful, but I don't need to." So, there's a bad tradition, the U.K. is bad on foreign language learning, the U.S. is bad. What is it about these big English speaking countries being particularly unsuccessful at learning other languages? It's an unhappy reality, I think.

PESSOA: We could go on, but we're tired and have to finish it. Thank you very much.

SILVESTRE: Thank you very, very much.

Brasilia, October 19th, 2015.

REFLEXÕES SOBRE A LINGUÍSTICA APLICADA CRÍTICA:
UMA CONVERSA COM ALASTAIR PENNYCOOK

RESUMO

Durante o I International Congress of Critical Applied Linguistics (ICCAL) – realizado em Brasília-DF, Brasil, de 19 a 21 de outubro de 2015 – Alastair

Pennycook (University of Technology, Sidney) fez a palestra de abertura do evento, intitulada Desafios da Linguística Aplicada Crítica. Amplamente conhecido por seu trabalho com abordagens críticas na educação de línguas e na linguística aplicada, ele generosamente aceitou o nosso pedido para falar sobre esse tema. No ano em que seu livro Critical applied linguistics: uma introdução crítica completa 15 anos de publicação, é uma honra para nós publicar nossa conversa.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Linguística aplicada crítica, ensino de línguas, formação docente, linguagem.

REFLEXIONES SOBRE LA LINGÜÍSTICA APLICADA CRÍTICA:
UNA CONVERSACIÓN CON ALASTAIR PENNYCOOK

RESUMEN

Durante el I International Congress of Critical Applied Linguistics (ICCAL) –celebrado en Brasilia-DF, Brasil, de 19 a 21 de octubre de 2015 – Alastair Pennycook (University of Technology, Sídney) pronunció el discurso de apertura del evento, titulado Desafíos de la lingüística aplicada crítica. Ampliamente conocido por su trabajo sobre los enfoques críticos de la enseñanza de idiomas y sobre la lingüística aplicada, aceptó generosamente nuestra solicitud de hablar sobre este tema. En el año en que su libro Critical applied linguistics: a critical introduction completa 15 años de publicación, es un honor para nosotros publicar nuestra conversación.

PALABRAS-CLAVE: Lingüística aplicada crítica, enseñanza de idiomas, formación del profesorado, idioma.

## 1. NOTES

1  We thank Pedro Augusto de Lima Bastos for the careful review of this interview and the suggestions that ensued.

2  Information in brackets was added by the interviewers.

## 2. References

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