

Review of Words and Actions: Teaching Language Through the Lens of Social Justice

Cassandra Glynn, Pamela Wesely and Beth Wassell, The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, Alexandria, VA, 2014. 90 pp. ISBN 978-0-989-6532-8-2. USD 26.95.

Globally Inclusive Communities. In *Words and Action: Teaching Language Through the Lens of Social Justice*, language educators have the ability to cultivate a sense of intellectual responsibility in their students by bringing marginality and oppression into the classroom conversation, disrupting stereotypes and discrimination with culturally attune language education. Glynn, Wesely and Wassell show their readers how they can accomplish this mindset of intercultural inclusivity by actively teaching and participating in social justice pedagogy. Complete with highlighted quotes of educators who have embraced and incorporated this social justice philosophy in their classrooms along with well thought out task-based activities and assessment rubrics for those who wish to start, *Words and Action* captivates its readers with glimpses into critically engaged classrooms where language is an agent of change.

The authors begin the book with a Fred Rogers quote: “[w]e live in a world in which we need to share responsibility” (1). It is immediately impressed upon the reader that asking questions, challenging preconceptions and promoting empathy lie at the heart of language teaching and learning. The authors skillfully map out seven short chapters which act as a step-by-step guide for the creation of a globally minded language classroom where reflective practice creates a bridge between the language students and the target culture to be discovered and explored. A free exchange of flexible innovation and responsible initiative is evident in these pages which have strong roots in the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages, looking specifically at products, practices and perspectives of the oppressed peoples of the target

language. The authors also effectively incorporate Backward Design and Integrated Performance Assessment into their templates and guided lesson plans.

Words and Actions gives its readers a firm grasp of the most essential concepts of social justice, including but not limited to: equality, equity, privilege, marginalization, oppression, dehumanization and global and intercultural competence. These tough topics force both students and teachers to reevaluate the surface-level analysis of the language textbook. Glynn, Wesely and Wassell dare its readers to think critically, to look beyond the mainstream approaches to language education, to alter and extend typical curriculum to address and engage in dialogue with those soft voices on the periphery of the target language. These voices matter. The integration of this subject into a foreign language classroom must be cohesive and structured. The authors stress the use of authentic materials, a variety of classroom organization models (e.g. whole-class, individual, groups, pairs), clear learning objectives for both social justice and language and a healthy mix of summative and formative assessment. Most importantly, the students must be able to see themselves, their identities, in the curriculum; there must be opportunities for them to demonstrate their strengths and continuous encouragement must be given to them to support their individual needs. The authors emphasize that if a student is reluctant to comment on a difficult topic in a classroom discussion, it is essential that that student knows that her/his silence is welcomed and highly valued. *Words and Actions* warns its readers that confrontation is necessarily uncomfortable, but the growth with which it is associated is invaluable.

The books strengths are many: the organization, the guided questions, the unit planning guides, the marriage of Integrated Performance Assessment and The Standards into the topic of social justice, the personal anecdotes from educators and their students—the list goes on. The use

of color, space and graphics is particularly successful as well. Each aforementioned element clearly highlights the key points. The authors do not simply tell its readers about social justice in the classroom, they show social justice curriculum in motion by supplying a great deal of SLA scholarship as evidence to support their thesis. The weaknesses of this book are far and few between. However, there are several instances in which the authors refer to students doing activities or tasks in their “first” language. This word “first” is problematic because language classroom is full of students whose first language is not one in the same. Perhaps “common language of the classroom” or “shared classroom language” would be better suited for the increasingly diverse classroom environment.

The pedagogical worth of *Words and Actions* stretches beyond the foreign language classroom. Each and every academic discipline could benefit from the incorporation of the reflective and impactful practice of critical thinking. More specifically, this book will be of great use to both the novice and the expert educator in the foreign languages. Nurturing students’ diverse identities and then connecting them to not only different but marginalized perspectives has the rare ability to radically change lives for the betterment of the inward-facing self and the global-self. Globally inclusive communities begin in the classroom. *Words and Actions: Teaching Languages Through the Lens of Social Justice* is a monumental step towards the creation of this new responsible community of learners and future teachers.