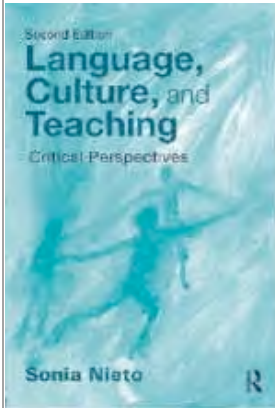


June 2010 – Volume 14, Number 1

Language, Culture, and Teaching: Critical Perspectives		
Author:	Sonia Nieto (2009)	
Publisher:	New York: Routledge	
Pages	ISBN	Price
xvi + 280pp.	978-0-415-99974-8	\$44.95 U.S.



Nieto’s first edition of *Language, Culture, and Teaching: Critical Perspectives* presented needed insight into the sociocultural and sociopolitical significance of language and culture in teaching and learning. This second edition illustrates much of what has changed as well as what has endured regarding language, culture, and teaching. As a means of keeping pace with current trends and issues, over fifty percent new material addresses education and policy concerns for language learners, multicultural educators, teachers, and everyone with a cultural background. What has endured is the necessity of respecting the significance of language and culture in the education of all students. Texts that examine issues of language and culture are prone to oversimplifying key concepts, promoting deficit views, under-representing the sociopolitical contexts, or providing theories untethered from practice. None of these are the case with Nieto’s book. This book is about advancing a critical perspective—filling a critical need at a critical time in the areas of language, literacy, culture, and education.

Nieto’s text is presented in four parts, totaling fifteen chapters. Each part begins with an introduction connecting what follows. Each chapter starts with a preamble that functions as a place to update its current relevance and introduce the content of the chapter, which is often a previously published article. All chapters end with references,

critical questions, activities for classroom, community-based advocacy activities, and supplementary resources for further reflection and study.

In Part One, *Setting the Groundwork*, Nieto begins with the question: What is the purpose of schools? How this question is answered affects educational expectations and learning. According to Nieto, two primary goals need to be considered: (1) "To provide all students of all backgrounds the opportunity to learn through an equitable and high quality education; and (2) To help students become critical and productive members of our democratic society" (p. 30). Additionally, this section further defines terms and concepts that inform multicultural education and linguistic diversity aimed at forwarding the aforementioned goals.

Part Two, *Identity and Belonging*, reflects the complexity of understanding who students are, the ways they define themselves, and the academic, social, and emotional consequences of the ways they are perceived. This part of the book details the relevance as well as the complexity of culture and the categories that influence the development of students as learners. Part Three, *Becoming Critical Teachers*, begins to shift focus to the role of teachers and their need to become critical by questioning status quo and advocating for their students by asking "profoundly multicultural questions" (p. 217). In an age of increased "bureaucratization, standardization, and privatization" (p.227), teachers are encouraged to work in solidarity with others and have courage and heart. Part Four, *Praxis in the Classroom*, builds on the ideals put forth in Part Three and illuminates actual ways in which schools and classrooms can affirm experiences for students. Although offered throughout the text, Chapter Four specifically presents numerous examples of practices for teachers who are truly dedicated to maintaining high expectations as they cultivate a just and equitable learning environment for all their students. Included are flexible models that provide a starting point to understand the range of possibilities entailed in developing affirming multicultural and multilingual educational experiences.

As a researcher and scholar-practitioner, Nieto thoughtfully grounds her arguments historically and across various disciplines. She also connects her work to her own personal story as a learner and as an educator. As a result of her background, research, and teaching, she is able to present essential cognitive and affective components of teaching and learning that must be considered.

As indicative in this work, as with others by Nieto, an appealing factor is the inclusion of teacher and student voices. Nieto seems to understand the importance of teachers talking to teachers, and listening to students. Nieto also adeptly writes in a voice *to* teachers not *at* teachers enhancing the accessibility of the complexity of the shared ideas. Furthermore, Nieto makes a point of establishing the role of teachers as instrumental but not exclusively responsible for challenging the educational inequities that manifest in schools/schooling. As such, the reader will appreciate the numerous factors embedded in the milieu of education effecting educational outcomes.

Given the chapters are mostly a collection of previously published articles some redundancy exists; however, it's entirely possible that redundancy could function as

reminders and reinforcement for readers, depending on how the book is used. Furthermore, chapters are not equally balanced in length; however, each forwards key considerations with equal merit. For instance, the second chapter on the limitation of labels is but a paragraph—but the significance of labeling that happens in schools has profound implications for teaching and learning. This point is aptly redressed in co-authored Chapter Nine entitled *Beyond Categories*.

To its credit, the text is conceptually coherent while each chapter offers substantive ideas that could be presented on its own. The book is intended to be appropriate to use with teachers; therefore, each chapter can stand alone prompting substantive conversations on presented ideas. In fact, the inclusion of critical questions, activities, and additional resources provide ready-made support for professors and teachers to build on the content offered in each chapter.

In many ways, the book begins with the end in mind by focusing on the intersections and implications of the presented work. I would recommend revisiting the introduction after engaging the content of the text to bolster the strength of the connections.

Overall, Nieto's second edition of *Language, Culture, and Teaching: Critical Perspectives* illustrates what has changed and what has remained the same ten years since the first edition. What has changed is the ever-increasing attention to the significance of language, teaching, and culture. The academic, social, economic, and political tensions that inform the implications of language and culture in teaching remain.

Nieto tackles a series of topics pertinent to teachers and teachers of teachers, vested in the developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to enhance the learning opportunities of students who bring cultural and linguistic texture to their life experiences. With the ongoing awareness of the viability of the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of students, this text is a needed resource for teacher education, teacher preparation, university faculty development, and professional development initiatives. Even those familiar with key tenets in language and multicultural education will appreciate the reality that views continue to expand the dynamics and complexity of language and culture. This text would be specifically valuable for courses examining social foundations, American education, language and literacy, sociocultural theories, educational policy, culture/diversity, Multicultural Education, Global Education, and Bi/Multi-lingual Education.

Reviewed by

Vera Stenhouse

Independent Researcher/Educator

<VLStthree@aol.com>

© Copyright rests with authors. Please cite TESL-EJ appropriately.