

Review

Casanave, Christine Pearson. *Controversies in Second Language Writing: Dilemmas and Decisions in Research and Instruction*. Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, 2003. 245 pages. \$22.00 (paper).

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For many years, in my teaching and scholarship, I have bridged the worlds of first language (L1) and second language (L2) writing, two worlds that are connected in significant ways. Both L1 and L2 writing deal with language, context, audience, cognition, materiality, and power. Both L1 and L2 writing specialists have become more aware of the political implications of teaching English, a language of colonialism. So closely connected are these fields that the terms “first language” and “second language” have limited significance: because many students speak several dialects and languages, there’s no clear way to determine which language is learned first. In many cases administrators decide to use the labels of “first language” and “second language” for the sake of convenience rather than for accuracy.

Historically, second language writing researchers have drawn on L1 composition theories. Scholars such as Vivian Zamel and Ann Raimes began to study L2 writing, in particular, process writing, more than two decades ago. Though second language writing scholarship has progressed a great deal since then, many L2 researchers still focus on topics originally discussed regarding L1, such as collaborative writing, peer reviews, and responding to student writing. In contrast, L1 composition scholars have seldom looked to L2 writing research as a resource, despite the growing number of students (usually called Generation 1.5) who graduate from United States high schools with multilingual literacies.

Christine Pearson Casanave’s *Controversies in Second Language Writing: Dilemmas and Decisions in Research and Instruction* is an excellent resource for L1 teachers, scholars, and administrators who want to learn how L2 writing research can inform their classrooms and programs. Though the primary aim of the book is “to help L2 writing teachers make informed decisions in their writing classes and build a knowledge base for conducting research on L2 writing” (1), the book is equally valuable to L1 writing specialists, who

will find that Casanave's clear, comprehensive treatment of pedagogical and research issues can shed light on the complexities of teaching writing and administering programs with multilingual students.

Casanave focuses on five broad topics: contrastive rhetoric, "paths to improvement" (i.e., fluency and accuracy, process and product, and error correction), assessment, "interaction" (i.e., issues related to audience and plagiarism), and politics and ideology. (Though she doesn't directly say so, her reliance on "controversies" is clearly influenced by Elbow's *Embracing Contraries*.) Her approach to these controversies is heuristic. Rather than simply relate the different views researchers have developed on these topics, she encourages her readers to reflect about the research by examining their own assumptions and teaching contexts. In the first chapter of the book, she prompts teachers to become self-reflective by examining their own writing experiences, their preferred teaching and learning styles, and the pedagogical theories that have influenced them. She advises teachers to develop a "coherent and internally consistent belief system" for teaching writing that will evolve throughout their teaching careers (15). In this way she engenders in her audience a sense of agency essential to self-reflection and change.

Because of her emphasis on letting teachers take their own positions on these issues, Casanave strives to present all sides of the controversies she describes. Throughout the book she uses the same systematic approach. At the beginning of each chapter she presents several quotations from L1 and L2 scholars, showing different sides to a particular issue; for example, in the chapter on commentary on students' texts, she gives quotations from Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae as well as L2 scholars Ilona Leki and John Truscott. After presenting several questions to introduce the topic, she reviews seminal research and connects it to her own classroom experiences in Japan or to experiences of teachers elsewhere. Each chapter ends with an overview of unresolved issues about the controversy and a series of questions intended to help teachers reflect about their own classroom practices and beliefs.

Almost always, Casanave's tracing of these controversies is enlightening. She does a particularly good job presenting the issues associated with contrastive rhetoric, which has been riddled with controversy from its inception in 1996 with the publication of Robert Kaplan's article in *Language and Learning*, "Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education" (also known as the "doodles" article). Kaplan claimed here that students from various parts of the world use culturally-based rhetorical patterns that he depicted as zigzags, circles, and lines. Kaplan's overgeneralized descriptions of complex cultural and rhetorical systems was widely criticized for being inaccurate, uninformed, and essentialist. Yet it is an enduring topic because,

in Casanave's words, "Simple treatments and interpretations of complex issues always invite critique, particularly if they also contain elements of truth" (37). She points out research, particularly Connor's work in textual analysis, which has corrected some of Kaplan's initial assertions while maintaining the validity of culturally-influenced structures. While noting that contrastive rhetoric continues to be ideologically undertheorized, she affirms its potential to inform teachers' practices. Typical of her approach throughout the book, she ends this chapter by telling teachers to avoid "uncritically applying principles" of contrastive rhetoric in their classrooms.

Casanave refers consistently in these pages to L2 quantitative research on topics such as assessment, student interaction, and electronic communication. Because many L2 scholars have been trained in applied linguistics, quantitative research has played an important role in L2 writing inquiry. In contrast, most L1 composition scholars have avoided such research because of its positivistic origins. While this avoidance is, theoretically speaking, understandable, it has left L1 writing teachers and administrators vulnerable to critiques of student writing made by college administrators, the media, and the public who value measurement data over qualitative inquiry. While research conducted on L2 writers cannot be uncritically applied to other contexts, some research results do provide helpful insights. Dana Ferris' extensive research into error correction, ably analyzed by Casanave, can help teachers make informed decisions when faced with students whose nonstandard errors imperil their chances of passing a high-stakes test or succeeding in a gateway course. Similarly, Casanave's overview of the large body of research in L2 student interaction, including peer reviews, student collaboration, and audience analysis, should be read by teachers and administrators who want to supplement their knowledge in these areas.

Casanave's discussion of plagiarism is also valuable. Postmodern views of authorship, as well as the wealth of information available electronically, have complicated notions of copying texts. Is plagiarism a result of different cultural notions of authorship? Is the Western concept of ownership of texts valid? Casanave's summary of second language research highlights the difficulty of identifying culturally-determined textual strategies and connecting them to Western notions of plagiarism. In fact, some research has revealed that second language students "plagiarize" for many of the same reasons that first-language students do—inexperience, confusion, lack of confidence. Typically, after Casanave details various views of plagiarism, she asks teachers to reflect. She writes,

[. . . B]efore assigning writing tasks that require students to write from sources, teachers [. . .] need to think through some of the issues, discuss them with colleagues, learn what institutional regulations exist, and plan how to approach the issue from a positive, educational perspective with students. [. . .] At the very least, if teachers are able to design meaningful writing activities for their students and to raise students' awareness of cross-cultural practices of authorship, plagiarism may not arise as a serious problem. (179–80)

This advice, valuable to both L1 and L2 writing teachers, promotes teachers' sense of their own agency while acknowledging the constraints within which teachers work.

My one concern about *Controversies in Second Language Writing* is Casanave's treatment of political and ideological issues in her last chapter. Her discussion of critical pedagogy is worthwhile, particularly when she describes the reluctance of some L2 writing researchers to acknowledge the political implications of their work. As she notes, many L2 teachers and scholars have resisted critical pedagogy because of their strong belief in "pragmatic accommodation": in other words, they see teaching as a politically neutral process of helping students succeed. Casanave contrasts their belief in neutrality with Benesch's critically pragmatic approach that provides possibilities for students to question and change the status quo (205). I wish that Casanave had probed this controversy further by pointing out that English language learning is an international industry consisting of schools, textbooks, underpaid teachers, and tuition-paying students. Obviously, this industry pushes forward pragmatic accommodation rather than critical analysis. I also wish she had dealt with politics and ideology in the beginning of the book, because these issues underlie many of the decisions that teachers, scholars, and administrators make about the controversies she describes. The way teachers decide to correct errors, for instance, is partly a result of their (examined or unexamined) notions about the purposes of teaching English.

Despite this concern, *Controversies in Second Language Writing* is a valuable text for L1 and L2 writing specialists. Casanave's judicious, clear explanations and her emphasis on teacher decision-making make this volume an excellent choice for composition theory and methods classes. Not only will it help teachers and administrators understand their increasingly multilingual constituency of students, it will help expand their ideas of what it means to write in a world in which traditional notions of "first" and "second" language are increasingly obsolete.

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