

Book Review *Shaping Language Policy in the U.S.: The Role of Composition Studies*, by Scott Wible

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Shaping Language Policy in the U.S.: The Role of Composition Studies, by Scott Wible. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP 2013. 204 pp.

During this present moment when various current national constituencies are “discovering” the importance of writing, let’s make sure they understand what it means to teach writing and what learning and teaching environments best facilitate it. We have position statements that articulate those conditions. As language arts educators, we ought to be at the center of all policy decisions that affect the teaching and learning of communication skills. Somebody needs to ask us the next time decisions are made about how facility with language will be assessed. Somebody needs to ask us before proclaiming a national crisis in the quality of college student writing. And we need to have ready answers when they do. (Shirley Wilson Logan, “Changing Missions, Shifting Positions, and Breaking Silences” 335)

Scott Wible’s new book, *Shaping Language Policy in the U.S.: The Role of Composition Studies*, begins by invoking Shirley Wilson Logan’s 2003 Chair’s Address to the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). When Logan affirmed the value of revisiting the CCCC’s language policies, Wible’s opening suggests, she was not only calling our attention to the importance of knowing composition’s disciplinary history; she was calling us to the public work of rhetoric. Framing his inquiry as a response to Logan’s challenge, Wible ably answers its appeal: to return to the CCCC’s position statements, to notice how their words still inspire and guide, and to study the democratic principles each advances so that we might compose “ready answers” and participate in the ongoing policy debates about language diversity and educational reform in the U.S. In short, Wible rightly reads Logan’s 2003 challenge as a rhetorical one, employing the implicit question it asks—What rhetorical means do the CCCC’s language policies make available to us as composition scholars and teachers?—as the exigency for his historical analysis of two key CCCC position statements, the 1974 Students’ Right to Their Own Language resolution and the 1988 National Language Policy, and later, as the context for his rhetorical analysis of the post-9/11 U.S. Department of Defense’s national security language policy. The result is a meticulously researched and compelling argument for keeping these historical documents at the center of our present-day efforts to engage the public agenda on linguistic diversity and literacy education.

Shaping Language Policy in the U.S. is neatly arranged into five chapters that, together, illustrate how social, political, and economic forces have variously influenced U.S. attitudes about linguistic and cultural diversity since the 1970s, as well as how these perspectives have impacted educational reform and policymaking over time. As the title implies, Wible's main interest is to examine composition's influence in shaping U.S. language policy. However, the analytical approaches he employs—historical, rhetorical, and archival—to “tell the fuller story” (18) of the field's intervention in policy debates across four decades ultimately situate language policy analysis at the nexus between composition studies and literacy studies.

Beginning with an introductory chapter that defines the study's terms and traces the rich history of language policy analysis as a multidisciplinary endeavor, the book's three main chapters each focus separately on a specific language policy. Chapter 1, “The Language Curriculum Research Group: Translating the Students' Right to Their Own Language Resolution into Pedagogical Practice,” addresses what Wible sees as the profession's continuing confusion about whether the 1974 CCCC position statement can, in fact, lead to pedagogical innovation and change, or if it is instead “a progressive theory divorced” from actual classroom practices (32). Chapter 2, “The CCCC National Language Policy: Reframing the Rhetoric of an English-Only United States,” extends Wible's historical analysis to demonstrate how this 1988 position statement recast three themes dominating the era's political discourse—“individual initiative, communal responsibility, and national identity” (26)—to counter the English-only movement's logic and position the CCCC as an organization committed to civic leadership and action. Wible brings these two historical accounts to bear on a contemporary policy debate in Chapter 3, “The Defense Department's National Security Language Policy: Composing Local Responses to the United States' Critical Language Needs,” to problematize the policy's instrumentalist goals for foreign language education in relation to national defense and to rally the field to develop an alternate policy that promotes multilingual education as a means of strengthening the nation domestically and abroad. In the final chapter, Wible offers seven fundamental ideas to guide future language policy work toward more socially just and inclusive ends.

Wible's investigation positions language policies as complex texts, rather than “stand-alone” documents, and thus his approach emphasizes the need for greater contextualization and for adopting what he calls a “long-term perspective” (175) to better understand their impetuses and outcomes. To achieve these aims, Wible draws deeply from an array of archived materials, recovering aspects of composition's history left largely unexplored to uncover the rhetorical strategies, pedagogical activities, and professional collaborations writing teachers and literacy scholars have employed to anticipate or respond to the language policy debates of their times.

For example, in Chapter 1, Wible challenges the perception that the CCCC's Students' Right resolution is “long on theory but short on practice” (4) by recounting the Brooklyn College-based Language Curriculum Research Group's (LCRG) efforts during the Open Admissions era to enact a culturally- and linguistically-responsive writing curriculum. Wible's recovery of the LCRG's pedagogical achievements, which included the creation of a textbook manuscript along with the development of teacher-training workshops, not only demonstrates how the “Students' Right ideal” (32) has been translated effectively into classroom practice but also clears the field's confusion about

whether this policy statement can yet inspire pedagogical innovations consonant with the goals for writing instruction today. Likewise, in Chapter 2, Wible's historical analysis of the CCCC's National Language Policy is infused with archival research. Tracing the CCCC's Language Policy Committee's (LPC) efforts to intervene in the English-only debate that marked the Reagan era, Wible's investigation clarifies the function of language policy statements as catalysts for change, both disciplinarily and within the wider public sphere. His argument for taking a long-term perspective on the outcomes of U.S. language policy debates is particularly apparent in this chapter. For while Wible allows that the 1988 National Language Policy did not provoke immediate change, his analysis reveals how the LPC's strategic use of outreach materials and activities—the creation of a policy brochure, the dissemination of letters and fact sheets to guide local responses to state-level legislative actions, and intentional networking with other language rights advocacy groups—gradually improved public perception of a multilingual America and its many achievements.

From Wible's careful rendering of these lesser known histories informing two key CCCC position statements, it is clear that writing teachers and literacy scholars have long been at the forefront of the nation's debates about linguistic diversity and language arts education. Mindful of the field's past strategies and successes, Wible reads the current debate about the need for a post-9/11 national security language policy as an opportunity to continue the public work of rhetoric. Like his predecessors, Wible's goal in Chapter 3 is not just to critique the Department of Defense's assumptions about "critical need" foreign language education as a means to redouble U.S. military power overseas, but also to assert composition's unflagging relevance in the policy debates, both nationally and locally, that seek to define the nation's language needs and thus influence educational reform. As in the past, the "ready answers" present-day compositionists might use to engage the conversations surrounding a national security language policy are ours to invent. On that front, and in our ongoing efforts to align more fully our research endeavors and teaching practices with the democratic principles our professional organization advances, *Shaping Language Policy in the U.S.* will surely lead the way.

Written primarily to professionals working in composition and rhetorical studies, Wible's broad-stroke arguments for reimagining higher education in ways that acknowledge, value, support, and sustain the language resources attending a culturally diverse society reach easily across disciplinary and educational settings. By situating the CCCC's position statements within the broader sociopolitical contexts and ideological questions that pressed their articulation—students' language rights in U.S. writing classrooms, U.S. minority and immigrant groups' language rights in an "English-Only" America, and the goals for foreign language education in the wake of 9/11—Wible not only makes the case for language policy as the link between composition and literacy studies but also demonstrates that such contexts and questions have always required concerted, cross-disciplinary response. The study itself, which weaves historical, rhetorical, and archival methodologies to frame critical analyses of three language policy debates, provides a graceful example of how these research practices can be productively applied to address real-world issues, a model for experienced scholars and newer graduate students alike. Working within the characteristic interdisciplinary traditions that ground both literacy studies and composition studies scholarship, *Shaping Language Policy in the U.S.* will

serve all language arts educators as a valuable source of information and insight for years to come.

WORKS CITED

Logan, Shirley Wilson. "Changing Missions, Shifting Positions, and Breaking Silences." *CCC* 55 (2003): 330-42. Print.