

Implications of EFL Critical Pedagogy: Theory, Practice and Possibility

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Abstract

This paper offers a historical background of how critical pedagogy has emerged, and how it has been adopted to the field of language education. The author then provides support for Crooks' (2010) argument that more practical examples of critical pedagogical EFL literature need to be reported. The paper also gives practical applications of this theory.

Theoretical Background

History

The most prominent educational theory which should be studied in order to understand the historical background of critical pedagogy is progressivism. Darling and Nordenbo (2002) summarize the five main themes of progressivism to be the following: a criticism of traditional education, a new understanding of the conception of knowledge, a new understanding of human nature, a democratic education, and the development of the whole person. "Progressive" educators believe that knowledge should be based on the child's natural interest and curiosity, and that traditional schooling does not serve the child's needs and interests.

Progressive educators see humans as natural learners. This fundamental theory is integrated by identifying a mismatch between what children actually want to learn and what the traditionalists insist that they ought to learn, with the belief that traditional schooling is unsatisfactory. Crooks (2010) explains that Dewey, a well known figure in the evolvement of progressivism, is important in order to recognize and acknowledge regarding the historical tradition and practice of critical pedagogy. Dewey emphasized learning through activities rather than formal curricula, and he opposed authoritarian methods. His left-wing social reconstructionist theories and works are said to be responsible for the change in pedagogy that began in the United States

early in the 20th century as emphasis shifted from the institution to the student (Darling and Nordenbo, 2002).

Various free schools and alternative schools were inspired by the progressive, anti-authoritarian educational theory during the mid 20th century. Among institutions to put the theory into practice was A.S. Neill's Summerhill School. Summerhill School is a pioneering, co-educational residential school which was founded in 1921 as the very first 'free school' in the world. 'Free' refers to the personal freedom of the children, as the school provides freedom, equality, and happiness after acknowledging that a child is innately wise, realistic, and capable of self-government and democracy (Neill, 1996).

Critical Pedagogy

Brazilian educator and theorist Paulo Freire's philosophy of education relates not only to the critical or radical education of earlier thinkers mentioned in the above section, but also to the modern Marxist and anti-colonialist philosophers. Freire promoted critical literacy skills among the socially oppressed Brazilian farmers, addressed ways in which minorities have been marginalized, and preached the ways in which education can give people tools to construct better lives and to participate more fully in determining their own destinies. Freire's (1970) problem-posing model of education strived for empowerment as an aim of education and he also attacked the traditional education which presumes learners as empty agents who receive knowledge from teachers.

Fundamental aspect of critical pedagogy is to overcome unfavorable life situations by raising awareness of the power relations embedded in society. As commonly argued by critical discourse analysts, the reason for minority marginalization is due to the power imbalance in society. Auerbach (1995) explains that power is unevenly and unfairly distributed in society, and the dominant classes exercise power through coercion and through consent. For these reasons the oppressor and the oppressed will always exist. As Giroux (2001) explains, critical pedagogues theorize that educational institutions are in fact a part of societies with unequal distribution of power, that they are political sites and are not neutral, and that therefore they tend to reflect and reproduce societal power imbalance.

ESL Critical Pedagogy

With the understanding that society is in fact unequal and unfair, critical approaches to second language teaching focus on the relationship between language learning and social change. English as a Second Language (ESL) educators who believe in critical pedagogy find it meaningful to adapt the theory of critical pedagogy into their curriculum and syllabi especially since ESL teaching mainly deals with racial and language minorities (i.e. immigrants and foreign students). Studies on second language learner identities (i.e. Norton, 2000; MaKay and Wong, 1996; Miller, 2003) indicate that some second language learners, without social, communicative, and linguistic competencies, and often with damaged identities, face hardships living in a new country. Language teaching and learning must be linked to the goals of educating students, to understand why things are the way they are and how they got to be that way (Simon, cited in Morgan, 1998). Norton and Toohey (2004) reminds second language teachers to keep in mind that language is not simply a means of expression or communication; rather, it is a practice that constructs and is constructed by the ways language learners understand themselves, their social surroundings, their histories, and their possibilities for the future. When the language classroom can be a place where students understand their own identities and their own society, language learning can be empowering. Critical ESL pedagogy is the “pedagogy of hope” (Freire, 1992).

Functions of ESL Critical Pedagogy

ESL critical pedagogy functions with the basic theory that materials and approaches should be relevant to the social, political, and cultural conditions of each group of students. Topics should be locally situated and should meet learner needs in the society which they live in. It is also important to find subject matter that provides meaningful content for lessons. Discussion topics such as ecology, gender roles, changing social identity, and employment equity are often valid and appropriate topics for ESL classrooms (Morgan, 1998). It is often emphasized that critical pedagogy is about ‘finding possibilities of articulation’ rather than the ‘medium of voice’ (Pennycook, 2001). In other words, it is more important to teach students the way to claim their rights in society than to teach them how to speak and write fluently and accurately. Problem-posing and rights analysis are considered the most crucial aspect

of the syllabus. By posing problems regarding the status quo, and including social, political and local issues that concern students, they are encouraged to be aware of the society they live in. Awareness of the issues promotes the participation in society, community, and politics. Participation in communities where language and racial minorities are often marginalized will, in fact, empower ESL learners as a result.

Critical EFL pedagogy

While educators in the fields of literacy education, ESL, and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) have discussed a large number of articles and accounts of the actual implementation of critical pedagogy (e.g. Norton and Toohey, 2004; Benesch, 2001; Auerback, 1995), much less has been reported in the EFL context, as critical pedagogy has been dismissed as culturally inappropriate especially for the East Asian contexts (Crooks 2010). One of the few studies conducted in an EFL context is reported by Shin and Crooks (2005). The study investigated Korean high school students' reactions to critical dialogues and non-authoritarian interactions with teachers. The study result showed that students were not resistant to the materials containing critical topics, and that East Asian students are capable of handling critical approaches.

One might ask if EFL learners who choose to learn an optional language, or those who can afford tertiary education, really need to be “empowered” so that they can “overcome their unfavorable situation.” EFL learners are quite different from ESL learners, as many fall into the category of future bilinguals in an elite category. Elite bilinguals, as Yamamoto (2001) explains, are generally highly educated individuals who choose to become bilingual and who seek out either formal classes or contexts in which they can acquire a foreign language. They are likely to continue to spend the greater part of their time in a society in which their first language is the majority or societal language. Yet within the EFL context, learners also come from different backgrounds of gender, sexuality, social classes, and the struggles within micro-relations of power always exist. Moreover, when the learners are indeed the elite members of the society who exercise power, critical pedagogy could serve an important role in education as the language learning could be a tool for them to understand how they came to possess societal power, how to

shift that power to the less-powerful, and how to exercise their influence in a right manner to make the world a better and more equal place. EFL critical pedagogy can be the “pedagogy of possibility” (Simon, 1992).

Crooks (2010) strongly argues that more reports of the actual implementation of EFL critical pedagogy are needed. Increased sensitivity to diversity, to different types of oppression, is likely to make radical pedagogical initiatives more relevant in a variety of classrooms, especially in EFL contexts.

Application

This section briefly lists the author’s classroom application of EFL critical pedagogy at a Japanese university. Critical pedagogy does not neglect nor replace well-developed teaching methods. Rather, it adds critical flavor to the existing textbooks and everyday instruction, often subtly. My goal is not to educate youth to be radical and anti-authoritarian, but to be aware of diversity, witness, and experience an example of power-shifting, and hopefully take these ideas outside of the classroom. It’s a grass-roots activity with the hopeful belief that if a teacher can change the classroom, students can change the world.

Negotiated Syllabus and Attendance Policy

One way to start a new semester with an activity based on critical pedagogy is to have students decide their own class policies. When an instructor has some freedom in syllabus design and class policy making, she/he may opt for a negotiated syllabus. The negotiated model differs from other syllabi in that it allows learner participation in selection of content, mode of working, ways of working, and assessment (Clarke, 1991). In my sophomore classes that are not coordinated with other sections, I let the students decide on their own attendance policy. Depending on their previous experience and maturity (or the lack thereof), I may provide a model (i.e. attendance policy from another class) and have students discuss in small groups how they want to alter it. After a group discussion, they select a class discussion leader and finalize the policy. I just sit in the back of the classroom, take notes and speak only when a direct question is raised.

The purpose of this activity is for students to take full responsibility in the policy making process and experience the traditional teacher-student power shift from the very beginning of the semester. By-products of this process are

the students' realization of their responsibility as college students and the meaning of democracy in education. Another way to accomplish the same goals is to implement self-evaluation as a part of student assessment, especially if the students are graded on a presentation or a portfolio. This ensures student participation in the grading process, sharing what is traditionally a non-negotiable authoritarian power.

Course Books

Course book selection immensely affects the topics to be covered and tasks to be done in the classroom. Although they are not necessarily based on the theory of critical pedagogy, many course books nowadays promote critical thinking (e.g. Active series by Sandy and Kelly, 2009) and cover controversial topics and social/ global issues (e.g. Impact Issues series by Day, Shaules, and Yamanaka, 2009; Stimulating Conversation by Goodmacher, 2008).

When selecting a course book, I also pay attention to the characters and the illustrations in the books. There should be non-native speakers of English using English, and there should be diversity of characters in terms of race, gender, handicaps, age, and families such as single or divorced parents and gay couples. Inclusion of rather unique and "different" people works against reproducing the social norms of marginalizing them.

Another way to implement critical pedagogy and be fully involved in critical dialogues with the students is to develop one's own material. Instead of using a course book for an advanced discussion course, students and I select social/global issues that concern us, read an article on the topics, and discuss the societal power relations. With step-by-step explanations and multiple examples, it is possible to raise an issue, critically analyze the power relations embedded in society, discuss how that power is reflected and reproduced in our community, pose problems, and come up with at least one realistic and doable action that the student can take.

Supplemental Materials

Even with traditional course books selected for four-skill-courses, the practice of critical EFL pedagogy can be included in everyday lesson plans. Teachers should ask themselves if they are not representing an inequitable society and its status quo when providing supplemental materials, visual aids and example

sentences. Teachers should also pay extra attention to the quality and quantity of the kind of input that the learners are provided. For example, “she” can be a pilot and “he” can be a nurse in example sentences and flash cards. If a listening component only features a stereotypically dichotomized “man” and “woman” as defined by traditional gender roles, a teacher could switch the roles and add more variation of untraditional gender orientations where appropriate and possible. The goal is not to take up the class time with the discussion of the social issues, but to intentionally include the otherwise marginalized groups of people.

Conclusion

Although the term “critical pedagogy” is rarely mentioned in the field of EFL, there are EFL teachers who actively promote and practice critical and radical topics such as gender education, radical feminist pedagogy, global issues, and critical thinking, as seen among the members of some Special Interest Groups (i.e. Gender Awareness in Language Education and Global Issues in Language Education) of Japan Association for Language Teaching. When the theory of EFL critical pedagogy becomes more widely known by like-minded teachers, this powerful theory could unite those educators as critical pedagogues. When more educators report and share their classroom ideas, materials, and syllabi as examples of practical EFL critical pedagogy, the power of a supportive community can, as a result, empower the teachers as well.

Empowerment and betterment of the society should be objective goals of every classroom, especially the language classes. Chuck Sandy, textbook author and language teacher, commented in his interview:

By definition, teachers are agents of change, and true education in any real, transformative sense is radical by nature. It's our job to wobble systems, to gently incite personal revolutions within our students, and to rebel against educational practices and ideologies which lessen anyone's chance at becoming more than he or she is. To say so in such terms is simply to put into words what all good teachers instinctively know and what most students instinctively recognize when they encounter such a teacher -- and I mean, here, a teacher in any field, in or out of school, foreign or not-so-foreign, with a course book or without any books at all (ELT Journal, 2011).

EFL critical pedagogy can be altered, appropriated and applied to classrooms of various levels and in various contents, from a fully involved critical discussion course to a coordinated four skill class with little flexibility in syllabus design, with a course book or without any books at all. When students understand social power, experience the power-shift, and learn to be sensitive and inclusive of diversity, an EFL classroom can be a learning community that leads to empowerment. The practice of EFL critical pedagogy is a grass-roots activity for the betterment of the community and the wider society. EFL critical pedagogy can be a pedagogy of change.

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