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The Interplay between Critical Pedagogy and Critical Thinking: Theoretical ties and practicalities

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Abstract

The main goal of education is believed to be transformation. A system should be dynamic in order to be transformative. Dynamism pumps blood to the body of the society. What prevents a society from transformation is passivity, which leads to lethargy and stagnation. Language teaching has an integral role in fostering criticality and denouncing passivity since language deals with words and words trigger reflection and action. The recent cooperation between language teaching studies and other disciplines such as psychology, sociology, politics, culture studies and philosophy underscores the significant role of language, discourse studies and applied linguistics in the educational system. Language pedagogues and material developers are accountable to bring this idea to the learners' awareness. The present article aims at shedding light on the concepts and research areas of critical pedagogy and critical thinking and the interplay between these two concepts.

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1. Introduction

The relatively rich literature of language teaching reveals the hard work and thought behind English Language Teaching (ELT). Language teachers, linguists, sociologists, psychologists, and teacher researchers have worked and studied hand in hand and contributed to the development of this field of human science. The history of English language teaching has developed from the so-called traditional methods to reformist, behaviouristic to

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communicative, learner-centred to the post-method era. In each of the methods or schools we mentioned, one aspect of language or learning is emphasized. For example in grammar translation method grammar learning is underscored while behaviourists stressed habit formation in learning. Communicative learning emphasizes the integral role of interaction and task based learning values discovery learning and is motivated by a theory of learning rather than a theory of language. In the post-method era in ELT, pioneers such as Freire, Pennycook, Canagarajah, and Kumaravadivelu have introduced concepts such as power, identity, voice and agency to language teaching. Post-modern theorists have challenged the teaching and learning theories and practices.

The above-mentioned thinkers in politics, culture, sociology and psychology entered ELT arena where students were recipient of ideas and findings of theory makers and policy setters. According to Pennycook (1990)[1], language teaching lacked a view of the social, cultural, political and historical context. According to him “Language is reduced to a system for transmitting messages rather than an ideational, signifying system that plays a central role in how we understand ourselves and the world”.

Critical thinking was first introduced to ELT by Dewey and called for critique of education and embarked on its calling to bring identity, voice, and power to teachers and students’ awareness (Fisher, 2001) [2]. Some ELT teachers, since then, have tried to implement critical pedagogy and critical thinking in their teaching practice. Critical Pedagogy in ELT enables teachers and learners to approach learning and particularly language learning as a means of transformation. As Akbari (2008) [3] put it, critical pedagogy has been around in ELT profession for almost two decades, but educators have relatively recently seen increasing interest in its principals and practical implications.

This paper will delve into defining the concepts of critical pedagogy and introduce research areas in critical pedagogy and critical thinking. We will, also, explore the concept of critical thinking and critical pedagogy, and finally explain applications of critical pedagogy and critical thinking in ELT.

2. Concepts of critical pedagogy

Borrowing Canagarajah’s (2005) [4] terminology, critical pedagogy is a way of doing learning and teaching, or a practice motivated by a distinct attitude towards classroom and society.

According to Pennycook (1990) [1], the nature of second language education, however, requires us to understand our educational practice in broader social, cultural, and political terms, and it is to critical pedagogy that he thinks we could most profitably turn, to extend our conception of what we are doing as language teachers.

As practitioners of L2 learning and teaching in a different way, critical pedagogues seek social justice and change through education. They argue against the dominance of a certain group of people in decision making and policy setting.

According to Akbari (2008) [3]:

The same people who have the power to make decisions in society at large are the ones who also have the power to design and implement educational systems, and consequently, their ideas and values get accepted and promoted while the values and ideas of others are not given voice.

This trend has also resulted in the exclusion of many countries from decision making and in a global scale enabled those societies which have more power and voice to monopolize decision making – particularly educational decisions in our discussion – to which less stronger societies have to abide.

Another important transformative vantage point of education is the view that Language is Knowledge, which is socially constructed. Simon suggests that “the first premise of any form of critical pedagogy is that the knowledge claims are interested and are modes of intelligibility grounded in the struggles, tensions, and inequalities that mark history’s bequest to the present” (as cited in Pennycook, 1990[1]). Therefore, it is incumbent on critical pedagogues to bring it to people’s awareness and inform them of their rights and abilities as social agents who can bring about change.

3. Introducing research Areas

Pennycook (1990) [1] explained that critical pedagogy is an attempt to investigate how knowledge is produced and legitimated within schools and confront those forms of knowledge critically in an attempt to legitimate other subjugated forms and to produce new forms. Critical pedagogy is involved with curriculum transformation and mandates the inclusion of participants in decision-making process of education. According to Prapasite and

Hardison (2009) [5], policy, pragmatic considerations and participants and their interaction are three major sets of constraints in decision making for what to study in a course (curriculum). They further explained that the level of policy consists of planning, learning objectives, means to accomplish them, programme implementation, such as teacher training and materials /resources development, and classroom implementation. Pragmatics considerations include time and resources. They assigned policy and pragmatics reconciliation to the participants.

Literacy, another interest area in critical pedagogy research, is developed to a notion of critical literacy, in contrast to the most common views of literacy as a functional skill or as acquisition of a fixed body of cultural knowledge (Freire and Macedo, 1987 [6]; McLaren, 1988 [7]).

Studies in literacy now suggest investigation on multiple literacies, and believe that students should be able to read and interpret multiple modalities (written, spoken, visual, special, etc.). “We take language, to mean any form of communication thus allowing for a merger between language and media education (Dooly and Masats, 2011 [8]). They believe that teacher education particularly in specialized language teaching areas needs to provide future teachers with methodological means to integrate language, technology, and media education. This, they strongly believe, can develop audiovisual and linguistic, ICT, and inter- and intra- personal competences. In addition, there is another view of education introduced by Kostogriz (2002) [9], which sees literacy education beyond autocratic top-down inculcation or bottom-up harmonious assimilation into a community of practice. Literacy scholars, nowadays, call for a pedagogy that teaches learners how to live with difference, contradiction and ambivalence.

Canagarajah (2005) [4], introduces reading and writing as main research areas in critical pedagogy. “Grammar level issues in literacy which are indirectly influenced by critical linguistics school, provide some useful leads that can be pursued by other critical practitioners” (Canagarajah, 2005 [4]). Critical practitioners aim at raising learners’ awareness and enable them to read critically and be sensitive about vocabulary choice and sentence form and meaning. Canagarajah best exemplifies it by Min – Zhan Lu’s attempt to discuss with her students the ways in which English grammar assumes ideological positions that may not be suitable for the interest of other speakers. Then she encourages her students to explore what other creative alternatives they may have for negotiating an expression of their unique meaning through English Language (Canagarajah, 2005 [4])

In an academic context, critical pedagogy has to do with multiple aspects of literacy. Critical literates put on their critical glasses when they are engaged with reading or writing. They are not easily overwhelmed with knowledge or anything they are given in books or lectures or on the Internet since they are equipped with critical reflection devices. Empowered student writers are effective and confident writers who have found their voice as social agents in both practical and political senses and they write to transform. To put it in Byram’s words (2009) [10], a politically aware and informed person should not be a passive object of politics, but as a subject or social actor should participate in politics.

4. Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy

Education is believed to bring about transformation. “What has been done so far to enable educators and learners to learn such skills? Would this banking model of teaching enable us to achieve this goal?

In order to become effective, teachers and students need to develop critical thinking skills. Gone are the days when teachers’ assumed responsibility was to teach a system of language to enable students to communicate well in the target language. If they want to prepare students for social, political, and economic transformation, then they should offer knowledge, debate, and dialogue to students (Giroux and Giroux, 2006) [11]. In his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1986) [12] wrote that critical thinking is a fundamental component of critical pedagogy but critical pedagogy extends beyond helping students become aware of injustices, challenge the status quo, rather it aims at taking active steps towards creating a more just and equitable society.

We must distinguish between critical thinking and critical pedagogy. Critical thinking is about avoiding foolish opinions, is about questioning all the assumptions about what is true, is to view arguments as open to debate rather than the last word, to infer carefully and draw appropriate conclusions and is one’s ability to distinguish between fact and opinion. Father of the modern thinking, Dewey, (as cited in Fisher, 2001) [2] defines critical thinking as an active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and further conclusions to which it tends. One of the founding assumptions of critical pedagogy as McLaren (2001) [13] puts, is that human beings, acting on the external world and transforming it, can, at the same time, change their own nature.

Unequal power distribution has divided the society. Critical pedagogues are concerned with the influence of this

division on culture and education. This problem could be tackled by nurturing critical capacity in learners or people in general and clear the way for them to resist such power effect. Empowering the learners, a primary aim of critical pedagogy, would be achieved when teachers are practitioners of critical thinking themselves in their teaching practice. Only can critical thinkers educate learners to be critical. They truly believe that education should empower students and consequently liberate the suppressed knowledge within the society and make their voice to be heard by the world. Educators should demand and defend this right of freedom of action. Otherwise, they cannot exercise giving agency and voice to their students. Leaving these ideas as beautiful transformative ideas on papers only will get us nowhere. Anyone who claims to be a critical pedagogue must take measures and bridge this gap between research and practice.

Over the last two decades there has been growing interest in bringing the critical thinking dispositions into education along with teaching knowledge of content and civic skills. The problem however is that it is insufficient to only teach several skills and sit back and wait to see them happening in practice. One way to get round this problem is to implement it in a critical pedagogy where education aims at informing individuals about political, cultural, economic, environmental, and social setbacks and demands students to get to grips with them and think of a solution to tackle the problems and transform the situation to everybody's benefit. Having this interest raised in individuals, pedagogy has provided one of the dimensions of effective critical thinking. According to Ku and Ho (2010) [14], there are four dimensions of thinking characteristics that emphasize different aspects of an individual's response to situations that call for thinking. A person should be a thinking lover and interested in making changes and enjoy contemplation. One should be a truth seeker, as well, looking for nothing but the truth. Furthermore one should systematically workout the logic in the information they receive by following a careful approach in their reflection. A person of biased opinions cannot pursue the truth, thus, one should keep remaining open-minded and flexible all the time.

Paul (as cited in Burbules and Berk, 1999) [15] believes that, since critical thinking allows us to overcome the sway of our egocentric and sociocultural beliefs, as moral agents and potential shaper of our own nature and destiny we should foster dialogue in which thinking from the perspective of the others is also relevant to the assessment of truth claims. What we require to allow these dispositions to be formed and expressed is a context of social relations. What links critical thinking and critical pedagogy is turning reflection to action in a social context open to transformation.

5. Application of Critical reflection and Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy criticizes the conservative discourse on education, and demands schools to be sites for cultural production and struggle and move beyond a language of criticism to account for students' resistance, human agency and Paulo Freire's pedagogy of possibility. Many professionals argue that teaching English is teaching a new system of communication and it does not have much political/critical significance. However, as Pennycook (2001) [16] said, they ignore the fact that any language is part of the wider semiotic system within which it was shaped. Akbari (2008) [3] argues against most publishers' advice for coursebook writers to follow a set of guidelines to make sure that controversial topics are kept out of their books which results in the application of neutral, apparently harmless topics such as travel, food, shopping, etc. . This practice drives many people in the society to margins just because their political, behavioural, or belief systems are inconsistent with those of the mainstream groups and they are deprived of certain opportunities.

Unlike traditional approaches that seek to identify good pedagogical interventions that will most effectively facilitate learners' assimilation of new systemic knowledge into known knowledge structure, socio-culturally informed studies offer much different recommendations for improving classroom practice.

To put it in Zuengler and Miller (2006) [17] words:

In seeing learning as participation, as relational and interactive, and as constrained by unequal power relations, Lave and Wenger's perspective asks educators to consider how the practices of school relate to those outside of school, how schools and classrooms themselves are organized into communities of practice, and what kinds of participation are made accessible to students.

Culture, an indispensable part of any language teaching/learning situation and source of content for many language teaching course books, is mainly chosen from target language. Advocates of this trend justify the use of target culture in course books by the benefits it holds for successful communication of emigrants to the US or UK with the users of the target language. However, not all language learners learn English to live or study in western

countries. Critical pedagogy demands course book developers to be more sensitive on the learners' cultural context. It has the added value of enabling learners to think about the different aspects of their culture and find ways to transform the society where necessary (Akbari, 2008) [3].

6. Concluding Remarks

Criticality is considered to be indispensable in our era since it would not pay to be recipient of information naively and lack the ability and skills to analyze and think critically and be target markets for ideology manufactures. To resist imperialism in any aspect critical thinking should be fostered in education system and transformation be encouraged to ensure development and prevent economic, political, sociological, cultural lethargy. In order to achieve this objective teachers must be empowered to be able to be able to encourage students to voice their ideas and bring about transformation.

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