

EXPLORING TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH WITHIN THE PRINCIPLES OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

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ABSTRACT: This article investigates classroom practice within the frameworks of exploratory practice and critical pedagogy. The research stems from my own concerns about the role of English language teaching within the context of “linguistic imperialism” and my own beliefs in critical pedagogy. Lessons were designed and discussed with student teachers in the Language Arts program where I teach in order to put into practice concepts that these students might be exposed to, in theory, in other disciplines. The sample lesson presented here, based on Freire’s problem-posing approach, and the discussion of students’ feedback show that it is possible to raise students’ critical consciousness but not so easy to reach Freire’s goal of an education that will lead to social transformation.

KEYWORDS: Exploratory practice. English language teaching. Critical pedagogy.

1. Introduction

Though the English language is still considered a global language or lingua franca, the teaching of English as a foreign/second language has come under severe attack over the past years (PENNYCOOK, 1994; CANAGARAJAH, 1999; PHILLIPSON, 1992). These strong claims have directly affected those teachers of English who, like myself, do not view themselves as being at the service of imperialism, and, on the contrary, believe that through teaching English they can raise student teacher’s critical awareness regarding the importance of their native language and culture. The fact that other researchers (McKAY, 2002; CRYSTAL, 1997) have defended the use of English as an international language has not made matters any easier for teachers. When English reaches the status of an international language, issues such as the model of the native speaker of English and the role of English culture, only to mention a few, start to be questioned as valid yardsticks to be used in English classrooms. In addition, even if, by definition, an international language “belongs to no single culture” (McKAY, 2000, p. 7), the teaching of a language is not an “ideologically neutral enterprise.” (RAJAGOPALAN, 2000, p. 5). The language may be used internationally and non-native speakers may even appropriate it and change it according to their needs; however, the political and economic power of the nations in which the language is spoken will not simply vanish as a result of that attitude.

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English is viewed by some as the language of imperialism, power and capitalism. Similarly, teachers of English are seen as responsible for maintaining the *status quo* of the power relationship between English language speaking countries and third world countries, or even worse, for having sold their souls to the devil (COX; ASSIS-PETERSON, 1999). As an English teacher myself and, especially, as an English teacher educator/trainer, I cannot simply give up a career because of such views. In addition, the students who register for Language Arts courses at UNEB¹ in the hope of becoming future English teachers have the right to do so, as well as to receive the best classes possible. If not, the course should be cancelled. As their teacher, I intend to contribute meaningfully to their teacher education.

I end up facing a “puzzle” (ALLWRIGHT; LENZUEN, 1997), which makes me stop to reflect on the kinds of classes I have been teaching and whether I am actually playing the imperialist role instead of an ethical and sociopolitical role. This same “puzzle” has led me to resort to ways of teaching that compromise my interest in English teaching, as well as to question my survival as a professional and my own political views on the issue.

This article investigates the need to change the teaching of English at Language Arts courses in Salvador, Brazil so as to allow these future English teachers to experiment with and reflect upon the advantages and disadvantages of adopting the principles of critical pedagogy as a framework to teach English. It is also an attempt to explore my teaching practice in order to adopt a ‘local approach to critical pedagogy’ (HALL, 2000) and reach a ‘locally helpful understanding’ (ALLWRIGHT, 2006) of my role as an English teacher and teacher educator. The lesson presented here, which is based on Freirean’s critical pedagogy, is an example of operationalization of the concept of “think globally, act locally, think locally” (ALLWRIGHT, 2003, p. 115).

2. The eight steps to solve the ‘puzzle’

Although I have been an English teacher and teacher educator for more than 30 years only recently have I started teaching at the university, with the responsibility to educate future English teachers who will act mainly in mainstream public schools. This new challenge led me to review not only my beliefs regarding teaching and learning but also the role those future teachers would play in their own classrooms. I soon realized that the student teachers’

¹ UNEB offers three courses in Language Arts: Portuguese and its literatures; Spanish and its literatures; and English as its literatures. However, the group of students who participated in this study belongs to a hybrid Portuguese-English program which is in the process of extinction.

needs required that classes were different from what they had been exposed to before entering the university program. There was no point in my presenting them with the same communicative-type of lessons they might have had as learners in high school or private language institutes. Even if I adopted (as I always did) a process-oriented approach (BERNSTEIN, 1977 cited in CANAGARAJAH, 1999), these lessons would not help them develop a more critical view of language learning and teaching which I believe English teachers should have. By the end of the Language Arts course, these student teachers needed to have not only communicative competence in English, but also critical awareness of their role as future English professionals. Thus, exploratory practice seemed to be an appropriate framework to solve the “puzzle”. One of the distinguishing features of exploratory practice is:

[...] the deliberate exploitation of standard classroom language learning and teaching activities as the means for collecting data on what happens in the classroom, preferably making at the same time a direct contribution to the learning, and certainly without lessening in any way the value of lessons as language learning lessons. (ALLWRIGHT, 1999)

According to Allwright and Lenzuen (1997), there are eight steps involved in exploratory practice. The first three steps involve the identification of the puzzle, a concerted attempt to reach an understanding of it, and a formulation of the understanding reached so far. I had been teaching the same group for a year and the classes had been focusing mainly on developing communicative competence and intercultural communicative competence. However, as I mentioned above, this approach did not seem to be fulfilling the needs of a course for future language teachers who would have to face the difficult reality of teaching English in public schools.

More than once we discussed the purpose of English teaching and the role of the critical English teacher but there was a missing link. They wanted to know how to plan lessons that would actually lead students to think critically. At that point in the course I realized that I was not practicing what I had been preaching. In addition, as Freeman (1990, p. 103) points out, the goal of a teacher preparation program is “for student teachers to develop the independent capacity to make informed teaching decisions and to assess the impact of those decisions on both their own and their students’ learning.” Student teachers need to experiment with different approaches to learning and teaching in order to make informed decisions later when they are in charge of their own classrooms. If the English lessons they attend present language viewed as “an ahistorical and apolitical phenomenon (e.g. solely as

speaking, listening, reading and writing)” (HALL, 2000) and a non-critical view of teaching, they will not be able to adopt a critical attitude themselves towards their own classes.

The next two steps were then to discuss with students and select and adapt classroom activities in order to investigate the changes that might result from teaching/learning English using a more critical approach. We reviewed the textbook² we had been using in order to identify topics that could be dealt with in a more critical manner.

The sixth, seventh and eighth steps involve conducting the investigation, analyzing its outcomes, and coming to new understandings. These steps will be described in the next sections.

3. Critical pedagogy and language teaching

Critical pedagogy advocates that language is not simply a means of expression or communication. “It is a practice that constructs, and is constructed by, the way language learners understand themselves, their social surroundings, their histories, and their possibilities for the future” (NORTON ; TOOHEY, 2004, p.1). As language teachers, we must be aware of the role we play in the classroom and the kind of language treatment we deal with in order to develop our students’ critical awareness of the world. However, we cannot see critical pedagogy as just another approach which will come with its prescribed design and procedures (RICHARDS; RODGERS, 1986). Pennycook (1999) discusses the importance of understanding critical approaches to TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) not as something that can be reduced to teaching techniques, methods and approaches. There is a need to work at multiple levels, including “an approach that aims at transformation, a way of shifting pedagogical relations to give students more curricular control” (PENNYCOOK, 1999, p. 341).

According to Freire’s educational philosophy (FREIRE, 1970), a human being is an agent of change. S/he acts upon perceived reality in order to improve her/his living conditions. Such action depends on her/his ability to reflect upon the world. This process is described as being one of detachment so that s/he can describe and interpret the perceived reality.

Education is viewed as a developmental process which helps to construct the perceived reality. Education may promote critical reflection of the world which supports and

² We have adopted *Inside Out* series published by Macmillan as the coursebook for the language component of the course.

encourages the person in her/his effort to improve her/his life. Freire (1970) criticizes what he describes as the “banking” concept of education, where the teacher's primary role is to transmit knowledge to students, i.e., depositing information into students as s/he would deposit money into a bank. According to Freire (1970 p.55), “the more the student studies to keep what is deposited, the less he develops critical awareness, which is the tool that will help him intervene in the world as an agent of change.”. In contrast, Freirean education is a mutual process of reflecting upon and developing insights into the students' evolving culture (SPENER, 1992). The lecture format, in which the teacher talks and the students passively receive information, is replaced by the "circle" where teachers and students face one another and discuss issues of concern in their own lives.

Freire’s approach to teaching advocates an alternative view of education , i.e., education that discusses reality through a dialogue between teacher and student, thus developing students ability to think and act critically , “the power to critically perceive the way they live in the world they are” (FREIRE, 1970, p. 64). Therefore, both teacher and student work together and are responsible for a process in which everyone grows and develops a kind of “*conscientização*” which will result in action to challenge their life situations.

Ohara, Saft and Crookes (2000) claim that critical pedagogy in EFL requires that the teacher maintains a dialogue with the students, giving them the opportunity to understand how the language being studied may contribute to the oppression of women, minorities or social classes. The teacher is able to talk to the students about the socio-cultural issues presented in the textbook (or not) so that learners can critically reflect upon them. This reflection may result in future action that will contribute to both personal and cultural improvement.

Freire’s concepts and methods are based on problem-posing and dialogue. According to Wallerstein (1983), the Freirean approach encompasses the following stages to curriculum development based on problems:

1. Listening: The teacher listens to students before, during and after class in order to identify and codify learners concerns so as to use them as themes in class.
2. Dialogue: The teacher uses codes³ to create dialogue in class. This process implies using inductive questioning in order to develop critical thinking.

³ Codes (or codifications in Freire’s terms) are concrete physical expressions that combine all the elements of the theme into one representation. They can take many forms: photographs, drawings, collages, stories, written

3. Action: The dialogue is not a neutral process. It attempts to lead learners to action, especially action outside the classroom. Problem posing is oriented towards action and empowers the learner to act upon his environment.

Based on my understanding of critical pedagogy, the discussions I had with my students, and classroom applications such as the one described by Okazaky (2005) and Hones (1999), I designed lessons to explore my students' reactions and to discuss possible changes these lessons would bring in them.

4. The lesson

LEVEL: Intermediate

OBJECTIVES :(a) To develop students' critical thinking regarding their neighborhood.

(b) To encourage the discussion of social problems in the neighborhood and search for solutions.

(c) To present and practice sense verbs: to see, to hear, to feel, to wonder.

(d) To write a short poem.

CODES: Handout with poems "From my window" (See APPENDIX 1); Student-generated poems (See APPENDIX 2); Pictures.

DIALOGUE AND PROBLEM POSING:

1. Warm up: Students talk about pictures depicting scenes viewed from windows⁴ and discuss what they see. What kind of neighborhood do you think that is? What kind of people live there?
2. Reading: Students read the two poems and discuss the questions below.
 - a. Who are these people?
 - b. How old do you think they are?
 - c. What kind of neighborhood do they live in?
 - d. Do they live in the same neighborhood? How do you know?
 - e. Compare the two poems and find similarities and differences.
 - f. What's your neighborhood like?
 - g. Do you like living there? Why?
 - h. What kind of improvements could be made in your neighborhood?

dialogues, movies, songs. They are at the heart of the educational process because they initiate critical thinking. (Wallerstein, 1983:199)

⁴ The pictures illustrate the poems in the book. They were photocopied and enlarged.

- i. What could you do to help?
3. Language work: Students underline all sense verbs in the two poems. and contrast LISTEN TO x HEAR; SEE x LOOK AT.
4. Writing: Tell students to close their eyes and imagine their homes. Tell them to go to the window and open it. What do they see, feel, smell, hear, wonder? Students write their poems guided by the poem skeleton and read them out loud. Students then discuss their feelings towards their neighborhood and changes they can possibly make.

From my window I hear.....

From my window I see.....

From my window I smell.....

From my window I feel

From my window I wonder

5. The last steps in solving the ‘puzzle’

Although this was not the first time we had discussions in class about socio-political issues, it was the first opportunity they had to actually express their ideas and search for solutions that could bring about change. As we can see from some of the poems, these students did feel something should be done about their community but most of the time the actual change was out of their reach. When we discussed the poems, they would always blame others for the situation and did not seem to be aware of the fact that they themselves could start a new process if they wanted to do so.

During our last feedback session of the semester⁵, one of the students in the group asked whether these types of classes would make any difference if the students belonged to an upper middle class⁶. Another student replied that in their own case, it did not seem to have made much of a difference and that they considered themselves critically aware of their social and political situation. They were able to discuss issues that they would not normally discuss in language classes but as far as actual change was concerned, nothing had happened. This feedback led to a discussion as to whether critical pedagogy would actually promote change or would simply raise students’ critical consciousness and, if they were the teachers, how they

⁵ During the semester several lessons were taught within the principles of critical pedagogy. All of them had as their main goal not only to develop learners’ critical consciousness, but also promote opportunities to discuss social transformation.

⁶ Students in this group, as most students at UNEB, belong to middle or low-middle class families. The great majority went to public schools and many of them did not have the opportunity to learn English in private language institutes.

would react to their own students' answers and attitudes. The sad note was the comment a student made about the educational system. She said, "*Ade, if other teachers do not ask their students to think critically in other subjects and if the educational system encourages this, how are we, as English teachers, going to change this picture if English is the least important subject in their curriculum?*"

It is true that it is not an easy task and that we cannot guarantee that we will be able to change our students' attitude towards life. However, if we start by raising our students' critical consciousness in the English class, we might be able to attain the goal of critical action which, according to Freire (1994 cited in OZAKI, 2005, p. 194), is not only "being aware of the reproducing process of the *status quo*, but also taking action to develop a more equitable society." As English teacher educators, it is our role to present our students with opportunities to discuss these issues and present them with examples of lessons so that they can see, in practice, what they might discuss, in theory, in other subjects. If one of our students actually changes as a result of these lessons and discussions, I believe we will soon have a number of future English teachers who will be willing to teach within the principles of critical pedagogy.

6. Conclusion

Although TESOL professionals have been aware of the dangers of teaching English as a neutral language for global communication and a number of researchers have suggested changes, it seems that the teaching of English at UNEB has not changed much. The 'puzzle' which led me to investigate and explore my practice in a Language Arts course led me to conclude that it will take a long time before Freire's ideal of a critical pedagogy become reality in our classrooms. Student teachers need more than theory. They need English lessons at the university that will show them how to raise their own and their future students' critical awareness and how to plan lessons that will lead to social change. This is not only possible, but desirable, if we, as teacher educators, want to change a scenario that was described by Cox and Assis-Peterson (1999). The two Brazilian university professors investigated 40 Brazilian English teachers to find out what they knew about and thought of critical pedagogy in ELT. The results showed that they were unaware of it despite the fact that "the National Curriculum Parameter is based on critical pedagogical assumptions" (COX; ASSIS-PETERSON, 1999, p.433).

My students' reactions to the lessons have led me conclude that teaching according to the principles of critical pedagogy is not an easy task; however, it is one that teacher

educators should take more seriously if we want to give some respect to our profession and to our future teachers. One sparrow may not make a summer but if out of every group that graduates from a Language Arts course there is one, soon we might have enough to make many summers.

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APPENDIX 1

From My Window (Myrna McDonald)	From My Window (Ellen Gallagher)
<p>From my window I hear voices that need help a child that's helpless and abandoned by the person they love.</p> <p>From my window I see blood an innocent person at the wrong place at the wrong time.</p> <p>From my window I hear a cry, a newborn coming into this world.</p> <p>From my window I feel lost it's hard to find somebody to love when you need it.</p> <p>From my window I wonder what's gonna happen in the next few minutes in the next few minutes, oh I wonder what's gonna happen in the next few minutes.</p>	<p>Looking out my window what a world I see! Down below all the carts and more carts pushed by tired people.</p> <p>Up above the sun and the sky and a little bit of hope. Always hope. The smells – musty pollution Buildings faded with years.</p> <p>The people are the same as everywhere. Each telling a different story – their own. Listening to the noises – What's going on out there? Is it a drug deal? Is it friendly fire? Could it be a quiet footstep for love?</p>

From: DEUSTCH, Nancy. *Voices of Our Own*: mothers, daughter and elders of the tenderloin tell their stories. San Francisco: Nancy Deustch, 2001.

APPENDIX 2

FROM MY WINDOW...

From my window
 I can see the world
 That was separated from me
 I can see some children in the park
 Playing a game
 With their happiness in their smiles
 I tried to reach out my arms, my hands, my
 fingers
 Till their smiles...
 Yes... I thought still that...
 But... they are only children...
 From my window
 The sea comes to my soul
 And I can hear the waves
 Where the air sleeps
 Even so distant...
 From my window
 Nothing else but a world,
 The world that was separated from me...
 (A.C.S.)

FROM MY WINDOW

From my window I feel
 the sunshine on my face
 It's early in the morning
 I wonder, Could I wait?
 Sleeping and dreaming of good things...
 Instead of the bad things
 The window makes me see.
 (L.R.)

FROM MY WINDOW

From my window I see
 My friends growing up as I am...
 From my window I hear songs
 Different from the other songs
 I generally hear.
 From my window I feel that we are
 different

I wonder we have grown up but we
 Don't forget how important our childhood
 is
 And how important our friends are.
 (A.)

FROM MY WINDOW

From my window I see a wall
 What a beautiful view I see!
 From my window I hear
 An old lovers quarrel
 And I feel unhappy
 Then I wonder if it'll last long
 Cause I can't, I can't stand,
 My disgusting neighborhood.
 (E.)

FROM MY WINDOW

From my window I see many buses
 From my window I hear my neighbor
 listening to music
 From my window I feel that the day has
 begun
 I wonder what day is today
 Because every day is the same thing.
 (V.)

FROM MY WINDOW

I'd like to stay alone with the stars
 And fly around the world just to find you
 Please, open the doors of my eyes
 Hold my hand and show me the way
 With you I understand the reason to live
 I don't care where we stay
 With you I'm always happier
 From my window
 I'll jump to the stars
 And I'll never be back.
 (D.F.B.)