
Critical Pedagogy in English Language Teaching

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Abstract

In this paper, one of the aspects of critical applied linguistics: critical pedagogy will be explored in greater depth. This is fundamentally supplemented by presenting how the idea of criticality in applied linguistics emerged as opposed to the mainstream one. In addition, I will expatiate on this particular critical domain to the stance from which it relates to my personal and professional life.

Introduction

The main point of presentation is divided into three sections. Firstly, it might be useful to understand the general notion of critical applied linguistics. Secondly, the norms and practices of critical pedagogy will be accounted for. In the end, I will endeavor to link my understanding of critical pedagogy to my teaching context and pedagogical philosophy.

I. Critical Applied Linguistics

From the 1980s to the early 1990s, the work of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), primarily focusing on improving students' learning and enhancing teaching quality, was affected by outside theories that came in education. One of the theories is the idea of criticality, starting into tracing and finding its ways into the classroom in different contexts.

The notions of critical applied linguistics mainly come from Critical theory, Neo-Marxism, Post-structuralism and Post-modernism. There is a fundamental principle within this approach that anything that is taken for granted has to be questioned and problematised. The approaches of critical applied linguistics offer a self-reflexive stance on critical theory. This suggests not only to give a critical aspect in showing an alternative but at the same time looking at the assumptions that critical applied linguistics holds to be fundamental and revisiting them within the framework of people's contexts. In addition, critical applied linguistics has an element of transformative pedagogy, in other words, changing things, but not necessarily 'really' changing things. Being 'transformative' has various levels, one of which can possibly be at the level of awareness. Critical applied

linguistics is not just taking what applied linguistics has been involved in and then criticising it. It is more than that since it involves practice in it. Pennycook (2001) points out that critical applied linguistics opens up a new set of questions and concerns, issues that have not been considered in normative applied linguistics such as identity, sexuality, ethics, desire, access, and difference. These are seen in relation to issues of inequality. By this, critical applied linguistics helps to promote a particular political version of what is meant by critical.

Critical applied linguistics borrows work from other critical domains, such as critical literacy, critical discourse analysis, critical pedagogy, critical language awareness and critical sociolinguistics.

Some of these are areas and some are tools. Moreover, critical applied linguistics uses work from feminism, post-colonialism and post-structuralism. Because of this combination of different parts, I think it is worth looking at critical applied linguistics as a shifting and dynamic approach to questions of languages in multiple contexts rather than a fixed body of knowledge or method.

Having briefly mentioned the framework of critical applied linguistics, I will particularly explore one of its important domains: critical pedagogy in turn.

II. Critical Pedagogy

As one of the domains of critical applied linguistics, critical pedagogy mainly emerged within the area of education. It views education theory as linked to ideologies shaped by power, politics, history and culture, unlike traditional views of education that claim to be neutral and apolitical. Its purposes are aimed at emancipation, change, and improvement. I can see that critical pedagogy starts with the perspective of the oppressed. As a result, the idea of working for social justice and against oppression is the basis of this critical aspect.

A major function of critical pedagogy is to critique, expose, and challenge the uncritical issues in which schools impact upon the political and cultural life of students. It also involves teachers, who must recognise how schools impart knowledge and power and how through this function they can work to influence or obstruct the formation of critically thinking and socially active individuals (Darder, 1995).

Critical pedagogy may be illustrated by pondering over this. If we ask ourselves where the knowledge that we get from our textbooks and curriculum is from, it can be argued that it is the knowledge that the powerful in the society want us to espouse, including discrimination and racism. The norms and attitudes are then transformed through the contexts of the schools. The society in which students live contributes in many ways to the espoused knowledge and ideological assumptions of what are important to learn

and not to learn. From the current pedagogy standpoint, the ontology of the structural-functionalist approach to education prevails and views knowledge as eternal and invariable, in other words, everlasting and remaining unchanged. Knowledge is seen as facts delivered to students as skills and beliefs. There is no challenge to the normative functionalist approach in terms of student / teacher relationships. There is a clear, static definition of what teachers and students need to do. The way knowledge is presented is not defied. The social economic and political conditions affecting students' lives are not taken into consideration. Students are thought to come to class and learn regardless of what happen to them outside. If they are doing fine, they are active students; if not, they are ineffective ones.

Critical pedagogy and education, however, examine official knowledge and current social conditions, which aim to effect social change. Given this viewpoint, knowledge is not fixed and social issues should be brought to the classroom for critical analysis. Thus, radically speaking, the critical approach to TESOL may be one bit within the critical pedagogy. Alternately, the critical approach to TESOL can be viewed as deriving from some of the principles of critical pedagogy, critical theory, and post-structuralism.

In the following section, my reflection on the influence of critical pedagogy on my teaching practices will be rendered.

III. Personal reflection on critical pedagogy

Not until recently have I come across the notion of 'critical pedagogy'. Looking back into several years of teaching, I could not imagine how the role of critical pedagogy would play in my own professional development. In the past, as an English teacher, I always had a certain conception that there needed to be a principally formal and methodological pedagogy, to be submissive to mainstream applied linguistics. Therefore, to me the most favourable teaching method was communicative approach. Learning and teaching were supposed to be official and should preferably take place in formal settings such as classrooms. Students were expected to follow what the school or their teachers offered. I never thought of questioning what my students really learned outside of the classroom nor had I given them opportunities in class to develop their own voice, by which I mean the possibilities to articulate alternative realities (Pennycook, 2001). I did not even bother to suspect whose knowledge influenced me in selecting teaching materials and fixing course contents, not to mention in some cases where teachers could not even select teaching materials nor set the contents since they were all fixed for them. My awareness of critical pedagogy had been absent simply because I envisaged myself as a good agent of English teaching whose job was just to prepare students to be successful in the real world.

After being exposed to the idea of critical pedagogy, I can feel that there are such socio-political powers unconsciously affecting my teaching methods and what students

learn in the classroom. I used to believe that all teaching methods were free from ideologies and politics and that there were no such power relations in understanding the global spread of English teaching and learning. Now that I have become aware of these issues, my understanding of teaching and learning has changed. What I gain from critical pedagogy is to view classroom as a place for thoughtful engagement. Within this new perspective, students should be empowered to be responsible for their own learning, create learning aims for themselves, and work collaboratively to achieve those aims. Working together as groups, they should be encouraged to see the world through a problem-posing viewpoint and question-assumed knowledge. Thus, new possibilities can be opened up. As for teachers, I believe that teachers should exercise their authority respectfully and with humility. They may collaborate with their students to create projects where they learn together. Both teachers and learners should then be fostered to promote social justice and to work against oppression.

Although the role of critical pedagogy has shaped my insight into teaching and learning, my perception of critical pedagogy is still abstract. This is because I have not been able to conceptualise the actual sources of power or social inequality that critical pedagogy claims to exist; these power relations and political interests are invisible and can not be literally found. At this stage, nevertheless, critical pedagogy makes me aware of previously unquestioned practices in education and it also enables me to see TESOL from a different angle.

References

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Language Glossary

espoused knowledge: insight gained through acceptance and belief

ontology: the study of the nature of being, reality, and substance

pedagogy: the strategies, techniques, and approaches that teachers can use to facilitate learning

About the writer:

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