

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN PAKISTAN: THE POSSIBILITIES

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ABSTRACT

The present paper discusses the possibilities of introducing the critical dimension of English language teaching in the Pakistani public education sector. In a sharp contrast to the traditional mode of English language teaching which has been the practice since long, the paper suggests the application of a critical mode of language teaching so as to explore its potential to develop “critical, reflexive, literate and socially engaged” English language learners rather than just proficient ones. It is primarily Freire’s notion of Critical Pedagogy (1970) that has provided a critical orientation to language learning and here his notion of critical consciousness assumes the form of critical language awareness (Fairclough, 1993). So the paper presents an overview of the philosophies that inform critical pedagogy, analyzes its central concerns in the backdrop of the Pakistani context and examines some of its basic principles that may be practically implemented in English Language Teaching set up in Pakistan. Critical English language learning is likely to contribute to language development in a socially and culturally relevant environment by integrating oral knowledge with the text book knowledge through engaging students in creative and critical discussions.

INTRODUCTION

Till 1970s, language had been seen just as a system and means of communication; “any system of formalized symbols, signs, sounds, gestures, or the like used or conceived as a means of communicating thought, emotion, etc” (dictionary.com). But, now language is not viewed merely as a means or system of communication but as an active reproducer and perpetuator of relations of power. Language has assumed the form of discourse that constructs and regulates knowledge, relations and institutions (Luke, 2003). For any meaningful communication to take place, a thorough and critical understanding of the workings of language thus becomes a necessity.

Any language is part of a cultural and social system within which it was shaped and is thus, infused with ideological, historical, and political symbols and relations (Pennycook, 2001). The identity of a language is shaped as a result of what has happened to it, and what it has done to others; if one looks back upon the history of English and its close association with the spread of colonialism, one is forced to think that “English is not an

innocent language” (Akbari, 2008). It was not just in the colonial era, but also in its current status as a global lingua franca that English language seems to serve and maintain the hegemony of major superpowers and is thus the language of power.

In Pakistan, like most of other former colonies, English language is primarily a symbol of prestige and high social class as well. At the time of inception of Pakistan in 1947, English was supposed to continue as the official language till national language(s) replaced it. “However ... English is as firmly entrenched in the domains of power in Pakistan as it was in 1947” (Rahman, 2003:4) as social and political factors have played a major role in maintaining the superiority of this language. Rahman (2003) directs our attention to the stakeholders, the elite class, the Civil Service of Pakistan and the officer corps of the Armed Forces who wish to maintain the dominance of English because it differentiates them from the masses; gives them a competitive edge over those with Urdu – medium or traditional education. This accounts as a major dividing

factor between the social classes in our society.

English, therefore, can be no more seen as a matter of neutral communication of facts or fictional truths, particularly so in its current status of a major global lingua franca. In the advanced set ups, we see this realization rapidly growing among the English teachers who have been redefining their teaching and thinking new ways of language teaching as “this is no longer a matter of drilling students in grammatical skills, instructing them in turning out a five-paragraph essay, responding appreciatively to novels, plays and poems or creating their own in the like manner” (Morgan, 1997).

Instead, the teachers are finding ways to help their students understand and act on critical literacy theories which investigate how forms of knowledge, and the power they bring, are created in language and taken up by those who use such texts (ibid). It is, therefore, a wholly different view of language, that of “language as social practice” or ‘discourse’ (Fairclough: 1993), that is increasingly being adopted by the language users across the world.

This concept of language as discourse forms the basis of Fairclough’s notion of critical language awareness. I have tried to merge Freire’s notion of critical consciousness (1974) with Fairclough’s theory of critical language awareness (1993) in my study. Though Fairclough does not explicitly acknowledge the influence of Critical Theory or Critical Pedagogy on his concept of critical language awareness, he uses the term critical in his concept of “critical language study” (1993) in the same tradition; “aiming to show up connections which may be hidden from people--such as the connections between language, power and ideology”(Fairclough, 1993). Almost similar concerns underlie the Freirian notion of critical pedagogy (1970s), that primarily aims at making individuals conscious of the

dominant power structures in the society with a belief that such a critical consciousness would empower them to challenge and question these dominant structures, and thus help them create a just and egalitarian world. It is in this sense that the term ‘Critical’ is used in the title of the paper, that is, in the tradition of Critical Theory and Critical Pedagogy that advocates an emancipatory interest in knowledge (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of critical pedagogy (CP) is introduced in the field of English language teaching and learning almost two decades back and since then, practitioners are being increasingly interested in its principles and practical implications (Fairclough 1993, Benesch 2001, Morgan 1997, Kumaravadivelu 2001, Pennycook 2001, Canagarajah 2005). Critical Pedagogy finds an application in the field of English language teaching in the follow up of two traditions. Firstly, critical pedagogy deals with issues of power in a society, and in the contemporary era, it is chiefly through language that power works and gets perpetuated in almost every domain of life (Foucault, 1972). English language has also been and is still, a language of power in most of the former colonies like Pakistan, so critical pedagogy can be most appropriately applied in the teaching and learning of this language. Secondly, critical pedagogy deals primarily with the issues about pedagogy or education in general and so it may inform the English Language Teaching (ELT) set up as well because ELT forms a part of the prevalent education systems and shares all of its features. Hence, it becomes necessary to be acquainted with the underlying philosophy and broad objectives of critical pedagogy as well as those of the existing education system of Pakistan, so as to decide: what can be adopted, what can be

modified and what can be ignored while exploring the need and possibilities of introducing the critical mode of English language learning in a Pakistani classroom. To begin with, let us look at the reasons that led to the emergence of critical pedagogy.

Critical Pedagogy

Since the last century there has been a growing realization in the Western and other advanced set ups about an urgent need to rethink the objectives of Education. The widespread passivity and an attitude of resignation on the part of the public has become a common feature of the current times, and this is what has forced the critical theorists in the West to cast a critical look at the goals of education. These theorists are of the view that any education system that treats learners as tabula rasa, and ignores the fundamental need of nourishing their creative and critical skills, does not do justice with the real meaning of the term 'education'.

The word 'education' is derived from the Latin word 'educare', which literally means 'to bring out'. Education, in a way, means bringing out, and the development of all the inherent potentialities of an individual. Education, in the larger sense, therefore, must have a formative effect on the mind, character or physical ability of an individual. If we view the term in this perspective, we feel that it is 'training' not 'education' that is generally being imparted in our educational institutions.

Freire (1974) argues that teaching that simply perpetuates the status quo without the possibility of changing current conditions is training, not education, and it is only the technical sense of the term 'education', which is in general practice.

In a technical sense, education is the process by which a "society transmits its accumulated knowledge, skills and values from one generation to another"

(Encyclopedia Britannica). But when we ponder over this definition, we perceive that our current system of education does not fulfill even this purpose. As far as transmission of values is concerned, we wonder whether it is any of the intended aims of the present education system. The latest trend in educational institutions is on showing results (Siddiqui, 2007). A good school or college is popularly defined as the one that shows hundred percent result and a good teacher is one whose students score good marks in examinations. As Wallace (2005) says, it is 'schooling', not education that we are imparting in our institutions, and according to Illich (1971), "The pupil is thereby "schooled" to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new".

Therefore, it is critical for us to redefine our concept of education and to reset its objectives. Perhaps, that is why Freire (1970) uses the term 'pedagogy' (which literally means "to lead the child") instead of 'education' in his concept of critical pedagogy, inviting us to redefine and subsequently, restructure our education system, language education and role of English language teachers as leaders of English language learners.

According to Freire (1970), there is no such thing as a neutral educational process. He states:

Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes 'the practice of freedom' the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Freire, 1970) It is easy to observe that in our country, education system is playing the former role. We find that the prevalent education system

is producing just conformists, as 'questioning' and 'critical thinking' is almost nonexistent in our academic institutions. Conformity to the existing traditions is promoted as a strong virtue while challenging or questioning is generally taken in a negative way.

Critical Language Awareness

The relationship between Critical Pedagogy and Critical Language Awareness (Fairclough 1993) is best explained in the following words of Shor (1992:129) where he defines critical pedagogy as:

Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse.

It becomes evident in the definition quoted above that it is language that assumes the major significance, and hence it is critical language awareness that has become the major focus of critical pedagogy. The habits highlighted by Shor can be fostered only through encouraging a close reading of the text. We can see that this is not a simple reading for reading sake, but a reading that enlightens the reader by encouraging him/her to read underneath, behind, and beyond texts; and not to consider texts to be unbiased; one explores alternative readings; one focuses on the beliefs and values of the authors; and one works for social justice and change (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004).

In critical pedagogy, we see that all the skills taught to the students do not focus just on some short term goal like getting good marks in the examination. Instead instruction in these skills places a major

emphasis on fostering a habit of reflection among students. Such a form of pedagogy aims at developing students into critically conscious citizens who are capable of their self development as well as of shaping a better society. In other words, critical pedagogy is a theory and practice of helping students achieve critical consciousness.

The researcher is interested in knowing how to introduce 'Critical Pedagogy' in Pakistani ELT set ups, as a primary means to evoke critical consciousness; how it may assist the teachers as well as students in enhancing learning through questioning and feedback and how it engages them by requiring them to think, justify or clarify their points of view or make connections to their own worlds.

Basic Concepts of Freirian Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is also known as 'the Pedagogy of the Question' (Bruss & Macedo, 1985 quoted by Kabilan, 2000) or in Freire's own words, 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'. It has two major focuses:

- 1- To make students conscious of the social, economic and political contradictions in what they know and what they are told.
- 2- To empower them to take action against the oppressive and dominant elements responsible for those contradictions

To achieve these goals, Freire (1970) advanced several vital concepts that require deep comprehension. Here, these concepts are being analyzed in detail as such background knowledge will bring a deeper understanding of critical pedagogy and hence, would provide us with the tools that will help implement a pedagogy that fosters critical consciousness, empowers the learners, promotes social justice and expands the horizons of human possibility. Understanding these concepts would allow teachers to fully grasp the ideas and

framework of Critical English Language Learning.

Questioning

In the Socratic tradition, Freire presented a pedagogy of questions, which involves posing questions to students and listening to students' questions. This is a practice that forces and challenges the students to think critically and to adopt a critical attitude towards the world. On the contrary, Freire strongly objects to the pedagogy of answers whereby teachers provide answers and solutions to students. He feels that such pedagogy discourages thinking and cannot stimulate and challenge learners to question, to doubt and to reject (Bruss & Macedo, 1985 quoted by Kabilan).

It is easy to find a similar pedagogy of answers being followed in our English language set up with the same consequences. The guide books provide the readymade answers to the readymade questions. So the students need not think about any question or any answer and just cram what is being provided. Even as teachers we never feel the need to think beyond some fixed answers to the text. Unless, we as teachers begin to question, there is no possibility of enabling our students to question. Only empowered teachers can bring up empowered students.

Banking Education

Freire (1970) strongly objects to the banking concept of education where the teacher's primary role is to transmit knowledge to learners, "depositing" information into students as people would deposit money into banks. The same transmission model of learning is widely being practiced in our educational set up. A good teacher in this paradigm (behaviorist) tries to fill the *empty vessels* (the students) with knowledge and expects the students to store this knowledge and reproduce it when required.

In contrast, a true Freirian teacher's role is to facilitate educational changes as well as progress at an individual level, personal motivation and commitment to develop. Besides that, his/her role is also to collect meaningful materials and guide discovery and, to be one with the students in a community of seekers (Timpson, 1988). He/she should view knowledge as a lifelong process that never stops.

Problem-solving

The life situations and realities of learners are made into problem-posing situations. For instance, learners can be asked to select any common problem that they face when they come to educational institutions and discuss the ways to solve it. The process of problem-solving begins when the teacher listens to learners' issues. Next, the teacher asks series of inductive questions (from concrete to analytical) to facilitate the discussion of the situation. Through development of the discussion, the learners will experience 5 steps of the problem-posing methodology (Nixon-Ponder, 1995):

- Description of the content
- Definition of the problem
- Personalizing the problem
- Discussing the problem
- Discussing the solutions of the problem

Such an exercise is very helpful for learners to develop their analytical abilities and connect their academic learning to real world situations. Besides, the process of problem-solving equips them well with a confidence that they generally lack.

Culture of Silence

The culture of silence means that people in power or the oppressors overwhelm the people in their control or the oppressed with their norms and values. The oppressed people become dependent on the culture of the oppressors, who are regarded as

"experts" and "specialists" in their society. To make things worse, the knowledge and needs of the oppressed are considered as inferior, worthless and not important.

This is a situation commonly found in connection with English language in our set up. Those who are well versed in English language possess a power that can silence those who don't have a command over it. The latter are therefore considered inferior and their views are considered worthless. Eventually, this culture of silence will strip learners of their self-confidence and place their action and behavior in the hands of the "experts" of the society. In order to break away from this norm, Freire suggests that learners confront their insistence on silence and control and, participate actively in learning situations (Timpson, 1988).

Dialogue

Dialogue is a distinctive feature of Freire's pedagogy. According to Freire, education that ignores the immediate lives of students and simply focuses on transferring knowledge denies students their humanity. The traditional education system refuses the challenge of engaging in a teaching/learning process called dialogue, in which both teacher and student have opportunities to become more fully human (Benesch, 2001). Critical pedagogy addresses this lack through its major focus on dialogue by regarding learners as subjects of their learning rather than objects of lecture and textbook material. In a classroom dialogue, the teacher and learner confront each other as knowledgeable equals in a situation of genuine two-way communication (Spener, 1990). It also involves respect and is characterized as a kind of speech that is humble, open and focused on collaborative learning (Boyce, 1996).

Dialogic pedagogy is a method through which teachers can bring students to the point where they can 'name their world'

according to their experience of it and not according to the ideologies, institutions and discourses that declare it to be otherwise (Morgan, 1997). It is these ideologies and discourses that deprive students of a firsthand understanding of the world around them as well as of their own selves. At best they learn to follow rules and instructions but do not develop the interrogative tools to evaluate whether the rules and instructions are useful, employable or legitimate (Shannon, 2007). It is because they have never been encouraged to think about these ideologies and discourses, discuss these, understand these and challenge these.

The students in a Pakistani context are reluctant to answer the questions or participate in class discussions for more than one reasons. First of all they lack speaking skills. They have never been asked to speak English throughout their academic career. So this is the major reason of their silence in the class. Besides, in the follow up of Lord Macaulay's vision, a culture of silence has been so well promoted in our education set up that students avoid talking to the teacher even in L1.

Therefore, our focus should be to develop a habit of discussion among the students by allowing them the use of L1 in the classroom. As it frequently happens, an insistence on speaking English would further push them in their silence zone and they would never be able to participate in the class. Once they break their silence and start participating in the construction of knowledge in the class, they can be encouraged gradually to speak English.

Following are some suggestions by Hardman (2011) that can help Pakistani English teachers in developing a dialogic pedagogy in the real sense of the term:

- asking questions which have more than one possible answer;
- giving students time to answer a question;

- encouraging students to ask their questions;
- asking pairs to discuss a question for a minute before they answer it;
- asking a pair or group of students to set questions for another pair or group.

In terms of following up a student, English teachers need to broaden their strategy by:

- Treating answers with respect and giving students credit for trying;
- Following up answers with words and phrases like ‘Explain’, ‘Why?’, ‘What makes you think that?’ and ‘Tell me more’ to provide greater challenge, encouraging speaking at greater length and get students to think around the question in greater depth.
- Building student responses into subsequent questions in order to acknowledge their importance to the unfolding classroom discussion

According to Hardman (2011) a guided co-construction of knowledge leads to significant cognitive learning, as well as social and emotional benefits. Social benefits include improved interpersonal skills that may lead to more tolerance, greater understanding, respect and cooperation, thereby creating a friendly atmosphere conducive to learning environment. Emotional benefits may include more confidence, a positive self image, greater motivation and interest in learning.

All these concepts seem quite revolutionary in a Pakistani set up and a lot of awareness needs to be created among the teachers as well as students regarding their significance. These concepts are almost paradoxical with those that are currently in practice and that are regarded as commonsense. Critical pedagogy is particularly concerned with reforming the traditional student/teacher relationship, where the teacher is the active

agent, the one who knows, and the students are the passive recipients of the teacher's knowledge (the "banking concept of education"). Instead, the classroom needs to be envisioned as a site where new knowledge, grounded in the experiences of students and teachers alike, is produced through meaningful dialogue (Morgan, 1997).

CONCLUSION

The knowledge that is being imparted to our students is just career-oriented and related to a specific discipline or field and fails to develop connections between content and learners' lives. On the other hand, the Critical Pedagogy requires teachers to relate all forms of information to the learners' context, their past, their present, their future as well as that of world at large.

It is therefore suggested that English teachers as emancipators have to search for alternative ways of thinking, writing, learning and teaching that have transformative potentials. They need to follow a collectivist, student centered method as advocated by Friere and Fairclough in which "learning emerges out of a joint negotiation of needs and interests, and blooms in critical consciousness" (Morgan 1997: 5).

It is obvious that the implementation of such a critical mode of teaching English would entail a lot of challenges in our existing set up. However, the need is to see the possibilities that are available and the modifications that may make critical pedagogy workable within the existing resources.

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