CRITICAL PEDAGOGY & ELT CLASSROOMS IN INDIA: SOME THOUGHTS

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Abstract:
This paper examines critical pedagogy and English language teaching (ELT) to understand how a classroom may, or may not, incorporate both of these aspects in a productive manner. It begins with looking at a relatively different paradigm of education that emerged towards the end of the twentieth century, where ideas of knowledge economy and knowledge capitalism gain ground. It traces a changing field of ELT that argues for language teaching from the perspective of Gramscian hegemony and spontaneous grammars. The paper briefly surveys the concept of critical pedagogy starting with the work of Paulo Friere and various other scholars. It will then see how this concept works in ESL classrooms and contexts, using culture and local concerns from the lives of learners particularly from India.

Keywords: ELT, critical pedagogy, knowledge capitalism, culture, Indian

1. Introduction

English language teaching (ELT) and learning, as is generally acknowledged, works with an in-school reproduction and an out-of-school inequality that combine to impact the outcomes for learners as well as a language programme. Critical pedagogy, a term traced back to the work of Brazilian educationist Paulo Freire who worked with adult learners in urban slums, has unfolded in various ways in ESL classrooms to varying effects. This paper will look at both these areas and how each is embedded in larger contexts of politics and practice. It will do so in order to understand the possibilities and limits of each, particularly from an Indian perspective.

1.1 Education and English Language Teaching (ELT)

English has been a marker of both achievement and arrival in one's life and career over a hundred years now. However, it is also embedded in larger educational systems, in a nation's formulation of language policies for its citizens as well as in professional

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domains of knowledge of second language acquisition. The following sections will chart some of the shifts in the understanding of the nature and purpose of education, the career of English language teaching and learning, and of language-in-education policies.

1.1.1 Education

Education has always been held up as a promise of knowledge that will improve or better the lives of learners. If at one point it was believed that knowledge must be pursued for its own sake, scholars and philosophers in the twentieth century argues that the purpose of education was to forge moral citizens and make society function better. In a liberal understanding, the purpose of education was to prepare its citizens for leadership, public service and participation in democratic processes. It was also, in the words of Barnett (2012), meant to educate learners into developing an ability and a capacity to critique society. The UNESCO's declaration (1997) on global citizenship also recommends educating citizens towards become moral and civic responsibilities who will be able to serve their community.

The twin forces of liberalization and globalization during the 1990s also generated the terms *"knowledge capitalism"* and *"knowledge economy"* in the late 1990s. A series of reports were published around the time by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (1996 a, b, c) and the World Bank (1998, 1999). These were later taken up as a policy template by world governments in the late 1990s, including in India where a National Knowledge Commission (NKC) of India was set up in 2005. Broadly speaking, these reports framed education as an undervalued form of *"knowledge capital"* that would need to be reconfigured in order to shape the future of knowledge institutions and society. For example, the NKC (2009) noted that higher education in India

> *"… needs a systematic overhaul, so that we can educate much larger numbers without diluting academic standards. This is imperative because the transformation of economy and society in the 21st century would depend, in significant part, on the spread and quality of education among our people, particularly in the sphere of higher education."* (p. 66)

Thus, the purpose of higher institutions and of work were being massively transformed by the end of the twentieth century.

In his 1999 book, Alan Burton-Jones presented the central idea of his work thus:

> *"The fundamental proposition of the book is that among the various factors currently causing change in the economy, none is more important than the changing role of knowledge… As the title of the book suggests, knowledge is fast becoming the most important form of global capital – hence 'knowledge capitalism'. Paradoxically, knowledge is probably the least understood and most undervalued of all economic resources. The central theme of this book is, therefore, the nature and value of knowledge and how it is fundamentally altering the basis of economic activity, thus business, employment, and all of our futures. The central message is that we need to reappraise many of our industrial*

era notions of business organization, business ownership, work arrangements, business strategy, and the links between education, learning and work." (p. vi).

This model of education suggested that the dividing line between learning and working was so blurry that each individual was the owner of his/her own intellectual capital and was a knowledge capitalist. Burton-Jones charted that decline in traditional forms of employment to new models of knowledge-centred organization and knowledge economy and argued that *"economic demand for an increasingly skilled workforce will necessitate a move to lifelong learning"* (p. vii). He noted that this would lead to changes in the relationships between learners, educators and forms and suggested governments would aid in this through a focus on knowledge acquisition (education, learning, skills formation) and knowledge development (research, innovation) policies. As Burton-Jones reiterated in a later article, we have now moved into an era of *"knowledge capitalism"* where knowledge was the *"only economic resource"* that mattered (2003, p. 143). Indeed, individuals had to *"focus on nurturing and enhancing their biggest asset: their knowledge capital"* (2003, p. 144).

Michael A. Peters in his Foreword to *Gramsci and educational thought* (2010 noted that the challenge today was to decipher the contours of knowledge capitalism, the struggles *"around symbolic manipulation and appropriation, copyright and the production of intellectual goods, the rise of the new global information utilities, and the new international class formations"* (p. ix-x). Peters further pointed out that Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt had termed this *"immaterial labour"*: the labour of *"informaticized"* industrial labour that was a service to the market, the analytical and symbolic labour of knowledge work (creative and routine), and affective labour that involved human contact and bodily labour. Education, in this context, was an example of immaterial labour that led to other forms of symbolic labour.

The following section will examine how the teaching and learning of English has been regarded in recent times, and what this may entail for the making of an immaterial labour.

1.1.2 English language teaching (ELT)

In 2006, David Graddol estimated that two billion people would be learning English by 2015 (Graddol, 2006, p. 14). The numbers did not inform of the proficiency levels of these learners, or the impact that the learning of English would have had on their lives. Nonetheless, the spread of English across the globe as an unintended, natural, neutral and beneficial lingua franca is no longer regarded as a dominant narrative. The imbrication of English in economic, cultural and political colonization as well as neo-imperialism has been widely studied. Pennycook (1995), for example, has pointed out English *"…threatens other languages, acts as a gatekeeper to positions of wealth and prestige both within and between nations, and is the language through which much of the unequal distribution of wealth, resources, and knowledge operates"* (p. 55).

It is in this context the Gramscian concept of *"hegemony"* is often used to lay out whether individuals, institutions or nation-states simply *"choose"* to learn and facilitate

English or whether English is closely embedded in unequal power relationships (Kachru, 1997, p. 230). Peter Ives (2010), for instance, suggested that "*hegemony*" involves the process of establishing consent and the adoption of English too is of a consensual nature. He pointed out that Gramsci had argued a normative or dominant grammar of any language will impede progressive social change if that change came from a different language or social groups and their experiences. Therefore, if a language (including English) was to cultivate inclusion and democratic practices, it had to emerge "*from an interaction among the multiple 'spontaneous grammars' of the speakers of the common language*" (p. 80). Language use for Gramsci was closely connected to education, culture, ideology and politics. However, it was also linked to issues of domination and subordination that carried within its possibilities for counter-hegemonic struggles in the war of positions. In other words, Gramsci's notion of hegemony helps to buttress the idea that English, in every context, is neither an obstacle nor always an effective tool for individuals to improve their conditions.

If the teaching and learning of English is framed in this manner, it becomes possible to argue for the possibilities of English to become a tool or a language of empowerment. However, such a context also requires that the role of the learners, teachers and the classroom transactions be regarded more in terms acquiring proficiency through a process rather than gaining mastery over a product. Viewed thus, English may become a tool that enables learners to participate and negotiate in the processes of the production of intellectual goods, as well as to navigate the appropriation of local knowledges by an international capital. It can be transformative tool that has the potential to change the existing status of learners from marginalized communities.

1.2 Critical pedagogy

Writing about critical pedagogy, Monchinski (2008) noted that critical pedagogy is a praxis, and praxis is action and reflection. In his words, "*It is a relationship that is always in progress, involving a constant give-and-take, a back-and-forth dialectical informing of practice by theory and theory by practice*" (p. 1). The concept itself is tracked back to the work of Brazilian educationist and philosopher Paulo Friere, who wrote in his *Pedagogy of the oppressed* that critical pedagogy seeks to "*make oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed*" with the hope that "*from that reflection will come liberation*" (1997, p. 30).

Education in any society is embedded in the world in which it operates. Or, to put it another way, those who have the power to make and implement decisions in society are also those who design and carry out educational systems, ideas and values. Thus, educational systems may reproduce those forms of discrimination and marginalization in terms of gender, race, caste, language, etc. operating in that society. Critical pedagogy, therefore, aims to transform its social worlds through education, including language teaching. Henry Giroux termed critical pedagogy as a political pedagogy that connects an "*understanding and critical engagement with the issue of social responsibility and what it would mean to educate students to not only critically change the world but also be responsible enough to fight for those political and economic conditions that make its democratic possibilities viable*" (2006, pp. 209–210).

However, if critical pedagogy is to negotiate and transform classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, institutional structures and the social and material relationships in the larger community, it must necessarily work with local contexts and conditions. In other words, there can be no global or uniform definition of critical pedagogy for all people at all times. Canagarajah (2005) defines it as a "*a way of 'doing' learning and teaching*" (p. 932), or in Pennycook's (2001) words, it is teaching with an attitude.

Critical pedagogy therefore connects significantly to the second language classroom of English. While the proponents of English as a system of communication may not grant the ELT classroom a politically transformative potential, the discussion in section 1.1.2 has laid out how proficiency in the knowledge capital of English would empower an individual in this knowledge economy.

Critical pedagogy is a mode of operating in a classroom that acknowledges that socio-political connotations of learning and teaching English and at the same, offers the tools to change for both learners and teachers. It validates voices and experiences from the margins and allows the participants to bring in their local contexts and concerns. It may help learners gain proficiency in a language such that it will allow them to read in it and read against it.

1.3 Language classrooms and the practice of critical pedagogy

Researchers have noted that while materials in use in a classroom may recognize the social aspects of a language, classroom transactions may continue to work from a limited perspective which does not examine who is talking about what to whom. In other words, learners and teachers operate in deeply entrenched and grim realities such as poverty, lack of adequate nutrition, disease, violence, discrimination along caste, community, gender, race and so on that would be extremely challenging to comprehend, leave alone deal with. Therefore, education in general and English language teaching and learning will need to address the life-worlds of its learners as a whole if it aims to engage in a praxis critical pedagogy.

One way of doing this would be to include themes or narratives that come from marginalized communities or society so as to sensitize learners to difference, or socio-cultural worlds that are not the same as mainstream ones. This could help generate awareness and discussions on those who are not like "us" and are "other" than us. It could also build on the day-to-day themes or narratives of the learners themselves. These would further incorporate contexts for thoughtful discussions on conditions and the possibilities for effecting any change.

1.3.1 Critical pedagogy and culture

An important domain of language teaching that has received increasing attention in recent years is the presence of culture in the classroom. The shift in the orientation of language and language teaching towards communication had drawn attention to the need to develop communicative competence as a language user. More recently, it was

recognized that culture is a fifth skill (Larsen-Freeman, 2009) that must be incorporated in language teaching in order to ensure effective and appropriate communication.

However, a large part of the cultural focus is on that of the target language, or English in the case of ELT. This may be useful in the case of learners wanting to immigrate to English-language countries. Nonetheless, English has also gained ground as an international language which in turn has led to its use among peoples with different and distinct cultural identities or worlds. In such a setting, critical pedagogy can become an important tool to empower learners to speak of and from their own culture and cultural identities to build on feelings of self-esteem. This has an added benefit of allowing learners to reflect on local practices and consider their positive and negative aspects. Critical pedagogy that draws on discussions of culture can also facilitate intercultural communication that connects and empowers people and ideas.

1.3.2 Critical pedagogy and local concerns

As noted earlier, critical pedagogy focuses on the local and the immediate worlds of learners. On the other hand, mainstream publishers work with particular guidelines for course writers that avoid certain topics. One example offered by Gray (2001) is PARSNIP that stands for Politics, Alcohol, Religion, Sex, Narcotics, Isms, and Pornography. Thus, coursebooks deal only with seemingly neutral topics such as food, celebrations, shopping, travel, etc. This is revealed through a cursory examination of most English language textbooks, where the language in the textbook deals with the concerns or needs or aspirations of a specific class, usually the urban, middle classes.

Apart from this, course writers may themselves continue to work with the examples or themes of their own social worlds. For example, the issue of discrimination in terms of caste or untouchability may be set in a story that happened long ago or in a place far away. This serves to distance the issue from the immediate environment and therefore not something learners can "recognize" or identify with.

However, the same social world would also be populated by communities on the margins whose behaviour patterns or beliefs or aspirational values would be very different from, if not in conflict with, the mainstream contexts. In fact, it is likely to be a situation of discrimination or denial of rights or a lack of opportunities such as a lack of drinkable water, sanitation, health or education facilities and so on. In such contexts, it would be helpful to incorporate local belief systems, celebrations, concerns and problems that would empower learners to use it for their own contexts and thereby also clarify the use of English language as well.

Such local examples may also contribute to helping learners develop the vocabulary and language to deal with and resolve their issues

1.4 Critical pedagogy, ELT and the Indian contexts

Critical pedagogy works with curriculum, classroom materials and transactions as well as the roles of learners and teachers in a classroom context. In India, the NCF (National Curriculum Framework) 2005 is recognized for making several changes to the then existing paradigm of education. For instance, it stressed the connecting of knowledge and

learning to life outside school. It advocated bringing in local social, cultural resources and making teaching-learning more learner-centred. It brought about several changes in the curriculum, including doing away with a formal examination system until class eight and introduced the choice-based credit system, etc.

These shifts have impacted the English language classrooms. The curricula have brought in in the local lives of its learners into the textbooks. There were non-conventional depictions of gender roles and class roles. Drawing on her work fieldwork with English and vernacular medium schools, Vaidehi Ramanathan identified the efforts of individual teachers and institutions to mitigate against the English-vernacular divide as a "*vernacularisation*" of English through various pedagogic practices. For instance, instructions on activities for a reading text in English may be given in the vernacular language. Similarly, traditional practices of choral responses and two-way translation are also deployed by teachers to help learners become comfortable in English. Ramanathan argues that ELT practitioners must take a step back to understand such "divergent" pedagogic practices and "*critically reflect on and question the very grooves of our participation, including the meanings we collectively make of our TESOL-related texts/signs*" (p. 138). Such a meta-awareness about a disciplinary thought collective will allow us, she argues:

"*…to see that our knowledges determine, in part, the social realities we inhabit by contributing to our sense of social order; to our creating, reproducing, and privileging some forms over others; and to our making sense of what is "natural" and "commonplace" in our discipline.*" (p. 138)

Thus, Ramanathan argues for a critical examination of the pedagogic wisdom of established ELT practices.

2. Conclusion

Critical pedagogy is about the extension of the word into the world and vice versa. A language classroom that deals with words and words that deal with worlds can base its instruction on the local worlds of learners such that it can enable learners to use language in concrete, recognizable contexts as well as empower them to make a change in their lives. Critical pedagogy is, in the words of Freire, a pedagogy of hope that holds a possibility of hope and change. Therefore, the incorporation of critical pedagogic modes in an ELT classroom would be crucial importance and have a profound impact, both in terms of language teaching and social empowerment.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The author declares no conflicts of interests.

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