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Critical Pedagogy in Classroom Discourse

Loukia K. Sarroub and Sabrina Quadros

Historical Perspectives

The classroom is a unique discursive space for the enactment of critical pedagogy. In some ways, all classroom discourse is critical because it is inherently political, and at the heart of critical pedagogy is an implicit understanding that power is negotiated daily by teachers and students. Historically, critical pedagogy is rooted in schools of thought that have emphasized the individual and the self in relation and in contrast to society, sociocultural and ideological forces, and economic factors and social progress. In addressing conceptualizations in Orthodox Marxism (with Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim) in the mid-19th century and the Frankfurt School (with Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Friedrich Pollock, Leo Lowenthal, and Walter Benjamin), contemporary critical theory still embodies the concept of false consciousness, the idea that institutional processes and material mislead people, and the internalization of values and norms, which induce people to act and behave according to what it is expected in society (Agger 1991). The problem of domination (which cannot be reduced to oppression, nor is it akin to it), a complex understanding of how social structures mediate power relations to create different forms of alienation (Morrow and Brown 1994), mainly depicts the reproduction of social struggles, inequities, and power differences, reflecting some of the main aspects of critical pedagogy classrooms.

In considering such critical theory in classroom settings, Giroux and McLaren (1989) acknowledge the importance of teachers and students understanding classroom pedagogical practices as a form of ideological production, wherein the classroom reflects discursive formations and power-knowledge relations, both in schools and in society. Within these conceptualizations, Livingstone (1987), referring to Freire (1970), refers to critical theory in classrooms as a critical pedagogy of practice, claiming the concept as a radical perspective in which “intellectuals engage in social change to make the political more pedagogical and the pedagogical more political” (xii). In such terms, the “political more pedagogical” calls for a redefinition of historical memory (which, in critical theory, is the basis for the understanding of cultural struggles), critique, and radical utopianism, as the elements of a political discourse highlighting pedagogical processes, such as knowledge being constructed and deconstructed, dialogue being contextualized around emancipatory interests, and learning being actively pursued in radical practices of ethics and political communities. In making the “pedagogical more

political,” Freire (1970) refers to a more profound idea of schooling in order to embrace the broader category of education in the forms of critically examining the production of subjects and subjectivities that take place outside of school settings and developing a radical critical teaching in which educators are able to examine how different public settings interact in shaping the ideological and material conditions that contribute to sites of domination and struggle.

Theoretically, critical pedagogy in classroom discourse embodies the practice of engaging students in the social construction of knowledge, which grounds its pillars on power relations. In utilizing critical pedagogy in the classroom, teachers must question their own practices in the process to construct knowledge and why the main knowledge is legitimized by the dominant culture. Moreover, through emancipatory knowledge (Habermas 1981) educators draw practical and technical knowledge together, creating a space for understanding the relations of power and privilege that manipulate and distort social relationships. In the end, participants in critical pedagogy classrooms are encouraged to engage in collective action, founded on the principles of social justice, equality, and empowerment (McLaren 2009).

One example of the application of the theory in classroom contexts in which English is taught as a foreign language directs the concept of critical pedagogy to a narrower, but no less powerful, dismantling of power structural systems of imposition and false consciousness. Pennycook (1989, 2006) and Canagarajah (1999, 2007) examine the role of English as a foreign language, which embodies political ideological assumptions in international classrooms. According to Pennycook (1989), educators need to understand local political configurations in order to know whether a particular language policy is “reactionary or liberatory” (112). Theorists in foreign language teaching (Phillipson 1988; Canagarajah 1999; 2007; Pennycook 1989; 2006) argue that the political imposition of English as a foreign language interferes with the vitality of local multilingualism due to the hegemonic status of English (in Canagarajah 1999, 208).

Considering the harmful effects of linguistic influence, Phillipson (1988) and Canagarajah (2007) cite two instances of struggle for local communities where English is the imposed foreign language. The first instance is the dependence and subjugation of the third world and, second, the values of the industrial consumerism culture, which reflect aspects of capitalist societies and countries that maintain the status of global, powerful structures. Pennycook (1989) complements such claims by arguing that the international spread of English historically has paralleled the spread of Western cultural norms of international business and technological standardization. Peirce (1989) also argues that we need to expand our views of language as “neutral,” since “English, like all other languages, is a site of struggle over meaning, access, and power” (405). Regarding these assumptions of subjugation of the third world, industrial consumerism, the cultural norms of international business and technological standardization, and struggle over meaning, access, and power, critical pedagogy practitioners approach English as a tool to engage participants in larger ideological discourses, promoting agency and knowledge, not only about the learning of the structural aspects of becoming fluent in the language, but, and more importantly, how such a language influences their immediate reality and communities.

In literacy studies, the discourse of critical pedagogy embodies the emancipatory force that challenges the idea of literacy as not being politically neutral, observing that with literacy comes perspectives and interpretations that are ultimately political (Gee 2008). In using literacy as a skill to prepare individuals to “read the word” and “read the world” (in Freirean terms), classroom discourse adds to the idea of learning the ability to decipher symbols and acquire the academic language to empower participants in their contexts, calling educators to open spaces for marginalized students to voice their struggles in political, social, and economic spheres. Freire (1985) defends the idea that literacy in itself does not empower those who live in oppressive conditions, but it must be linked to a critical understanding of the social

context and action to change such conditions. In these terms, Auerbach (1995) refers to critical literacies as the “rhetoric of strengths” (644) for focusing on cultural sensitivity, celebration of diversity, and empowerment of parents, and she also highlights that empowerment is not regarded in individual terms but in social terms (655). An essential aspect of critical pedagogy in literacy learning includes the ongoing recognition of the power relationships amongst individuals who are involved in education, such as the power dynamics within family, classrooms, programs, and institutions. Street (1990) also argues that the failure of literacy campaigns reflects the non-consideration of significant aspects of literacy practices by those more powerful outsiders such as teachers, administrators, and politicians.

Core Issues and Key Findings

The practicality of critical pedagogy, while considered highly theoretical, has brought up a series of questions founded on empirical research wherein educators have attempted to incorporate its principles in classroom discourse. While such practitioners highlight the positive facets of critical pedagogy, such as students’ stronger engagement with curriculum, empowerment through dialogue and involvement in their communities, critiques of their cultural norms, and participation in patriarchal countries/communities, the same researchers have also pointed out the shortcomings of the theoretical and ideological model. Some of these deficiencies include students’ aversion to idealized concepts, teachers’ limited understanding of the implementation of “critical” in their curricula, lack of support in adopting critical perspectives within the school site, as well as practitioners’ skepticism of the “empowering” outcome in students’ lives.

To use critical pedagogy, practitioners attempt to reconstruct their classrooms as a three pronged discourse structure. Structurally, these three aspects include a curriculum that needs to be founded upon students’ interests, cultural needs, and community empowerment. In terms of the dynamics of interaction, the teacher/educator in the classroom usually focuses on participation and skills in dialogue in a rational articulation of one’s context with others who are differently situated (Young 1997). In this regard, the participatory dynamics and dialogical skills involve the construction of dialogues amongst peers, questioning concepts and common behavior, doubting the ritualized form, explaining one’s perception of reality, providing evidence of assertions, advancing arguments from diverse knowledge and/or disciplinary perspectives, drawing upon experience with the curriculum and topics addressed, and listening to a variety of voices in different discourses. In essence, this is the capacity for critique, reflecting the critical agency of participants (Habermas 1981).

Meeting Different Voices: “Teaching English for Cultural Awareness. The research about the use and implementation of critical pedagogy in international language classrooms possibly exemplifies some of the structural and dynamic rearrangements that teachers and educators have undergone to teach critically. In this regard, Sadegui (2008) opted to implement critical pedagogy in an Iranian classroom through adopting locally and situated forbidden topics or taboos, as well as engaging students through discussion; reading diverse articles; and utilizing students’ own sources of information and knowledge, such as texts, pictures, and audio-recordings. Although meeting resistance, Sadegui (2008) suggests that critical consciousness does not necessarily urge critical action, but it gives participants of the prevalent discourse the chance to resist or change.

Showing similar results in Iranian high schools, Ghahremani-Ghajar and Mirhosseini (2005) focus on utilizing dialogue journals to express students’ thoughts on any topic of interest. Ghahremani-Ghajar and Mirhosseini (2005) found that students consistently appropriated the opportunity to utilize “their” English to express dissatisfactions and opinions. In coding the journals into descriptive and personal versus critical and creative essays. Ghahremani-Ghajar

and Mirhosseini (2005) assert that in the last quarter, one percent of the journals were written with descriptive and/or personal style, 82% being either critical or creative, with 42% being creative ones. In an English class in South Korea, Shin and Crookes (2005) employed critical pedagogy by creating projects, such as slide presentations, travel plans, discussion groups, poster presentations, and written essays. The outcomes reported show that students highly valued class discussions as sites for listening to their peers' thoughts to further their views and experiences. Shin and Crookes (2005) point out that students engaged in dialogue by asking questions, revealing disagreements, and clarifying others' comments. Generally, time allotted to discussion with and among students has been thought of as good teaching practice, and in the United States, it has long been part of child-centered learning; however, elsewhere, and in countries where historically there has been little communication in the classroom from students, a more dialogue-oriented set of teaching and learning tools form a critical pedagogy.

Huang (2011), exploring an English reading and writing classroom in Taiwan, utilized writing journals by focusing on notions of critique (Luke and Freebody 1999) and different perspectives of reading material referring to the same topic. Huang (2011) explains that reading became a conscious process through which students uncovered hidden messages and contemplated multiple perspectives. In writing, students were encouraged to write because writing became, in some way, meaningful.

Despite the positive experiences within English language classrooms using critical pedagogy, challenges have not been absent from these practices. Rice (1998) ponders the welcoming concept of "criticality" in different cultural practices at the time that Eastman (1998) and Canagarajah (1993) question the integration of critical pedagogy into a curriculum in which English is learned as a means for survival and cultural status. Sadeghi (2008) highlighted her "solitude" in the school site as a result of adopting the perspective and touching on complex topics, adding the struggle in examining biased voices in every different context. Shin and Crookes' (2005) concerns focus on combining the dialogical discourse while maintaining a certain level of authority. The researchers also point out the limited language proficiency to participate in English talk. Ko and Wang (2009) emphasize the teacher's lack of time, insufficient classroom time, Large class size, and cultural expectations in education as barriers in Taiwan English classrooms.

Empowering Through Literacy: Practices and Limitations. In literacy studies, the social change perspective embodies principles of the multiple-literacies approach, further emphasizing the issues of institutional power, cultural struggles, and social change. Essentially, literacy becomes a site for struggle because the conditions created by institutions and structural forces influence the forms and access to literacy acquisition (Auerbach 1995). In the critical perspective, literacy, in itself, does not lead to empowerment or resolve economic problems, if the link does not embody a critical understanding of the social contexts and initiatives to change inequitable conditions. In critical theory studies, literacy processes comprise complementary modalities, such as connecting the oral and written "word" to the understanding and critique of controlling structures and domination, offering students the opportunity to successfully participate in the academic discourse. In terms of literacy programs, such as family literacy, critical pedagogy practice encompasses the parents' control over the program's goals, issues, themes, research agenda, dialogue as a key to pedagogical process, content centering on critical social issues for participants, and the critical notion of action for social change. In short, and theoretically, critical studies in literacy practices challenge power structures through the study and discernment of hierarchies as a first step to improve the condition of marginalized groups, engaging them in social participation and discourse patterns.

Empirically, participants have demonstrated indifference to the discourse of critical pedagogy. Within a family literacy program for Guatemalan Maya families, Schoorman and

Zainuddin (2008) examine changes in the curriculum to implement critical pedagogy and the empowerment practices with which teachers were engaged. The researchers discovered that participants in the program did not have social and structural change as their primary goal for seeking literacy education. Conversely, Schoorman and Zainuddin (2008) highlight that parents sought literacy education to “fit in” to the American system, mainly contributing to the academic success of their children.

On the positive side, contributors and participants of the Literacy for Social Justice Teacher Research group, Rogers, Mosley, and Folkes (2009), examined a classroom where the literacy practices focused on “literacies of labor,” bringing up the (economic) class conflict topic within students’ immediate job contexts at work as a tool to negotiate awareness and critique in adults’ lives. Through the use of slide-based picture story and dialogue, Rogers et al. (2009), argue that while the students became more proficient with language and literacy, they also became more knowledgeable about their rights as workers and “how to be advocates for action” (136).

Although focusing the findings on her practice as a critical educator, Rocha-Schmid (2010) investigates a family literacy program in London where she attempted to engage immigrant parents in a critical pedagogy discourse of empowerment. The approach gave opportunities for parents to discuss the school culture and practices and to position themselves within a different cultural system. Rocha-Schmid (2010) also acknowledges that parents displayed their own deep awareness of the topics and issues addressed and debated; however, the discourse patterns in which she was involved as a teacher did not allow for further and deeper dialogues within the classroom.

Through the exercise of critical pedagogy in literacy programs, researchers have also presented the limitations of the perspective. For example, Rogers and colleagues (2009) understand that the use of critical literacy in education is necessary but insufficient in the struggle for justice and social action. They argue the need for practitioners to work with cross-societal structures in order to build more reliable alternatives. Rocha-Schmid (2010) calls for teachers’ discourse patterns to be revisited and scrutinized through the lenses of power and control. For Schoorman and Zainuddin (2008), the immediate need and desire of immigrant learners to participate in the school and in mainstream social discourse challenged their engagement with the critical view. Beyond the above limitations, considering Ellsworth’s (1989) questions, “What diversity do we silence in the name of ‘liberatory’ pedagogy?” (299) adding “to be critical of what, from what position, to what end?” (299) seems to be a constructive and productive approach to take.

Research Approaches

Research in the Field. Research utilizing critical pedagogy commonly inquires into how power and the often externally imposed knowledge structures together privilege specific forms of knowledge within students’ learning and language usage. Theoretically, Giroux (1988), Freire (1985), and McLaren (2009) inform the paradigms of critical pedagogy. In the classrooms, Freire (1970), Ashton-Warner (1965), Peterson (2009), Waterhouse (2012), and Siegel (2006) have developed scholarly work that contribute to teachers’ practice in the field of critical pedagogy, as well as inquiry regarding the use of traditional methods within a critical approach framework (in addition to others already cited). Freire (1970) and Ashton-Warner (1965), for example, made use of generative words to engage students in literacy practices. Peterson (2009) acknowledges the importance of starting with generative themes (topics that emerge from students’ interests and preferences), which can be discovered and reflected upon while using a diversity of language and performance arts activities to involve students in the practice of critical pedagogy. Peterson (2009) also emphasizes that even with standardized

curricula, teachers can utilize the life experiences of students, as well as poetry, movies, field trips, and music to boost critical thinking and awareness in the classroom.

In exploring different approaches in critical pedagogy research, Waterhouse (2012) advances the critical literacy framework and Multiple Literacy Theory to examine the effects of becoming critical within the students' context. Siegel (2006) analyzes the language usage ideologies professed in teacher and student discourse, suggesting that teachers should focus on a critical awareness approach when teaching language. In terms of differentiating between critical pedagogy and critical thinking, Burbules and Berk (1999) offer an analysis of both practices, explaining that they are theoretically different: One espouses an ideological position in response to power structures, while the other fosters a set learning strategies to deconstruct texts, which may influence classroom outcomes and student achievement. Lewis, Enciso, and Moje's (2007) edited book contributes to that end, wedding studies focused on literacy, critical theory, critical pedagogy, and activity theory because "closely examining this dialectic process as it relates to learning and schools reveals, among other things, the role of power and ideology in people's learning lives" (21). However, research on the issue of such differences in classroom practice is scarce in the literature.

The teaching and development of educators in critical pedagogy has evolved with studies in classroom discourse and practice. Hennessy, Mercer and Warwick (2011) developed workshops that focused on dialogical inquiry of classroom lessons and analysis of recorded teaching practices. Hennessy et al. (2011), engaged teachers in the process to explore and reformulate ideas of classroom dialogue in the context of using an interactive whiteboard. In Brazil, Cox, and Assis-Peterson (1999), through the use of interviews, explored the facets of empowering discourse (ED) as understood by English teachers and how they used or did not use it within their classrooms. The authors reveal that the results yielded a vast unawareness of the concept and understanding of critical pedagogy. Cox and Assis-Peterson (1999) highlight that, as educators, the research gave them the opportunity to reflect on their own practice as professionals who had failed to offer a profound and further understanding of critical pedagogy. With Worthman (2008), his observation of two distinct adult learning classes acknowledges the differences between teaching for empowerment and teaching for emancipation, which in the research, refers to a different discourse and overview of learners. In his analysis, while one teacher prepared learners to "act appropriately," the other positioned students to critique different discourses (461). Roche (2011) explored her own classroom, focusing on the students' discursive production within critical pedagogy. Citing meaningful samples from students' critiques and sociological concerns, Roche (2011) highlights her growth within the theory and the participation of parents in her classroom. Her critical practice not only influenced her students' lives but also the school setting.

For the most part, research on critical pedagogy and classroom discourse links data collection and analysis through the use of qualitative research methodologies and relevant research tools. Observations, field notes, interviews, work samples, dialogues, video records, and written journals compose the main body of tools to collect data. Researchers collect data mainly in classrooms where the framework is used and analyzed them in terms of engagement of participants, cultural impact on learners' lives, limitations of the theory, teachers' methods of implementation, and efficiency in implementing the framework. Researchers often used critical ethnographic or critical discourse perspectives (cf. Carspecken 1996; Rogers 2011).

New Debates

In a broader perspective of critical pedagogy implementation, Eastman (1998) questions whether it is even appropriate to introduce and implement critical literacy into classrooms

where students have more of an interest in learning the English language itself or a need to learn the language, rather than an interest in being critical of it. Rogers et al. (2009), wonder if critical literacy education will make a material difference in the lives of students and their families. From a more micro perspective, Rocha-Schmid (2010) inquires if it is possible for educators to be able to distance themselves from their discourses and ideologies to keep them from influencing and controlling the course of classroom dialogue. In addition, both Rocha-Schmid (2010) and Ellsworth (1989) ponder which diversities or voices are silenced when using a “liberatory” pedagogy. More research is needed to address critical pedagogy and critical thinking and how these are either conceptually or empirically connected. Additionally, there have been in the past 20 years, a rich array of classroom studies, urban youth, and international English language settings founded upon critical theory frameworks, but critical pedagogy and discourse have not been studied systematically on a larger scale, spanning multiple socioeconomic and sociocultural contexts, including rural, multilingual, urban, as well as ethnically and/or socioeconomically more homogeneous classroom settings.

Implications for Education

Educational linguistics offers educators the potential for better understanding language use from the perspective of traditional grammar (what is usually taught in schools) and functional grammar perspectives (cf. Schleppegrell 2004). Critical theories and pedagogy, in turn, provide a useful framework for uncovering power relationships between standard forms and many other forms that are used by individuals, families, schools, and work places, in order to examine the combined form and function and its impact on interaction and learning. Further research includes the need for practitioners to study how critical pedagogy influences critical thinking, ethnographic studies that examine the impact of critical pedagogy in different cultures, and conversational and discourse analyses as necessary tools for better understanding the “critical” in critical pedagogy classrooms. Drawing attention to micro-level analyses of classroom interaction in the context of larger cultural and social processes continues to be important, especially in regions of the world experiencing political and environmental changes that are simultaneously and often instantly visible through digital and multi-media outlets. Ultimately, at stake are individuals and collectives of individuals’ access to and savvy negotiation of teaching and learning practices that aid them to succeed in spite of institutional constraints and power structures.

Further Reading

For an overall understanding of the diverse facets of critical pedagogy, *The Critical Pedagogy Reader* (Darder et al. 2009) offers not only the theoretical perspectives that inform inquiry, but also explores how some researchers have applied these perspectives in their studies. Works from Giroux (1981; 1983), Freire (1970; 1985), and Phillipson (1992) give the most widely used historical and theoretical viewpoints for critical pedagogy: for an overview of classroom discourse, McLaren (1986; 1989) and Barbules (1992) offer salient reflective and analytic arguments focused on practice and theory.

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