

Putting Things Right: State-of-the-Art on Critical Pedagogy and Writing

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Putting Things Right: State-of-the-Art on Critical Pedagogy and Writing**Abstract**

The concept of critical pedagogy (CP) has been around for some time in education, but there has not been so much research in ELT conducted on implementing the basic tenets of CP into the classrooms through one of the skills. This paper is an argumentative paper in that it argues for bringing students' native language, their own culture, daily experiences and problems, some basic concepts in CP, into the classroom, hence giving more voice to the students in the learning process and making it more meaningful and motivating for them. As there are things to argue for in this paper, there are things against which this paper implicitly argues. These argued-against concepts are some principles of the traditional ways and methods of teaching because they all have banned the "judicious use" (Akbari, 2008) of students' L1, culture and their experiences and problems in the classroom. All this is done through writing since it has so much power and potential for bringing into the classroom the underlying principles of CP, so a marriage between CP and writing. This argumentation has also some implications for language teachers and local materials writers. For language teachers, this makes them more competent because they can make use of all these things as instructional resources in the classroom, neither are they any more considered false copies of the master's voice_ native speakers_ rather genuine masters in themselves. For local materials writers writing materials based on these basic tenets seems to be more promising and helpful since they no longer import dictated materials from Inner-Circle countries, moreover; their materials become more relevant to the students and teachers, hence exploits their potential abilities as far as learning English is concerned.

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1. Introduction

Critical pedagogy is not a set of ideas, but a way of 'doing' learning and teaching. It is a practice motivated by a distinct attitude toward classrooms and society. Critical students and teachers are prepared to situate learning in the relevant social contexts, unravel the implications of power in pedagogical activity, and commit themselves to transforming the means and ends of learning, in order to construct more egalitarian, equitable, and ethical educational and social environments (Canagarajah, 2005).

This appreciation of critical pedagogy (CP) may not catch all sides of the concept, but it gives a rather succinct account of some of the basic principles of the tradition. The concept of CP has been around for some time, perhaps with the publication of Paulo Freire's "The Pedagogy of the Oppressed" or, even if one can go a bit further back, with John Dewey's "Democracy and Education". However the term 'critical pedagogy' was not coined until Henry Giroux coined it in his influential book "Theory and Resistance in Education" in 1983 (Darder et al., 2003). No matter how much theorizing has happened on CP; the tradition has not enjoyed its full potential in the classrooms yet (Akbari, 2008).

CP is like a tree with some very central branches, the basic principles. 'Empowerment' is one of those very main branches of great moment in CP. It is mainly concerned with developing in students and teachers the self-esteem to question the power relations in the society (McLaren, 2003; Peterson, 2003), thus gain the 'voice' they deserve in the same society (Heyman, 2004). In one with the concept of empowerment is that of 'resistance' which is both "movement against the dominant ideology ... and a movement toward emancipation"

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(Chase, 1988). CP looks at education as a political enterprise (Kincheloe, 2008) and aims to raise students' "consciousness", a term borrowed from Freire, to make them more aware of the power games in the society and their own position in that game (Burbules & Berk, 1999). It is the "pedagogy of inclusion" (Pennycook, 2001) and has in large part been created to give the marginalized students the "right to speak" (Peirce, 1989, 1995, 1997). Through breaking away with the principles of "banking" concept of education and a mutual "dialogue" among the teachers and students, the oppressed students come to resist domination and oppression, hence aiming for social transformation both in the classroom, and in a larger scale, in society and the whole world (Freire, 1972; Pennycook, 1989; Akbari, 2008; Sapp, 2000).

For the CP side of the coin, some very basic concepts were concisely presented, and now it is time to have some word about writing pedagogy. Henry Giroux (1978) categorized the practice of writing into three different schools: (1) the technocratic school (2) the mimetic school and (3) the romantic school, although these may not be the schools which have informed ELT much. The technocratic one is more a kind of bottom – up approach to writing, focusing more on grammatical rules. Writing is a 'craft' in this school, and it fails to make a connection between the students' inner worlds and outer worlds. The mimetic school starts from the top rather than the bottom. The proponents of this school believe that good writing appears as students read good writers such as Plato and others of that ilk. The romantic school of writing puts emphasis on the students' feelings at the expense of a systematic, logical writing pedagogy. The proponents of this school try their best to make a connection between the student's good feelings and their writing abilities. They believe as students feel good the good writing itself emerges accordingly. None of these approaches examines the 'when-and-how-one-writes' process. Nor do they look at writing from a critical and political point of view, teaching students how to write critically about a subject. In other words, no trace of CP, if one can say, can be found in these schools. The students' experiences and social environment, which are of high importance in the curriculum, are not taken into account in these schools at writing.

The 'process' approach and the 'product' one are two other approaches to writing which are more prevalent in ELT than the aforementioned ones. The process approach focuses more on the process of writing and consists of planning, drafting, revising, responding, evaluating and

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“post-writing” (Seow, 2002). In the product approach to writing the focus is more on grammatical accuracy and the final product, such as essay and a report, rather than the writing process itself (Reid, 2001; Brown, 2001). The writing pedagogy in the SL writing classrooms mainly draws on the cognitivist and the expressivist perspectives and has left the social constructionist one behind which is in large part informed by and has informed CP (Santos, 2001. See Zamel, 1982, 1987; Johns, 2003; Wrigley, 1993; Memering and O’Hare, 1984).

This paper, in line and informed by the social constructionist theory, is intended to explain some very basic principles of CP that should and can best be integrated into the writing classrooms. To this end some words, the basic principles, are borrowed from Akbari (2008) and Morrel (2003). These are centrality of “students’ local culture “, importance of “learners’ L1 as a resource “, “Historicity” and “problem-posing” or students’ real life concerns. For the rest of the paper, I will argue for bringing these basic tenets of CP into the writing classrooms and the reasons for doing so.

2. Students' Local Culture and First Language

Whether target culture (the culture of the nation whose language one is to learn) should be taught in the classroom has been the concern of so many ELT practitioners and led them towards a lack of certainty dealing with it in the classroom. This unwillingness on the part of teachers to teach target culture owes much to the spread of English as an International Language (EIL) and some other contemporary trends in the field. In fact, the spread of EIL has challenged the traditional relationship between culture and language teaching and the way the students have been supposed to assimilate towards the cultures of Inner Circle countries (Mckay, 2003).

Byram and Feng argue for breaking away with the traditional ways of teaching culture, among those the mainly practised facts-oriented approach in which the cultural norms of the target language are dissected and then presented in the classroom accordingly (2004). In the traditional sense, “both the linguistics dimension which focuses on monolingualism and the cultural dimension which focuses on monoculturalism aimed at benefiting the native speaker of English “(kumaravadivelu, 2003). But these dimensions, monolingualism and

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monoculturalism, are what CP rebels against and argues for an English culture which is global and no longer the property of a specific country, culture or race (Modiano, 2001).

To think of creating a common culture to present in the classroom is also irrelevant, instead what we have is a “dynamic flowing of multiplicities” (McKenna, 2003). This multiplicity aligns itself with the basic tenets of postmodernism, a tradition that works against the “ever-present temptation to exoticize L2 learners and to essentialize their home cultures” (Leki, 2003). In this international and postmodern era when the L2 learners are to give information about their own community and culture (Mckay, 2003), it is totally irrelevant to expose learners to “one distinct culture” (Modiano, 2001). Moreover so many teachers lack the needed knowledge or are in large part unwilling to talk about the target culture, since this is distinctively at variance with their own identity. Bringing the “source culture” (Gortazzi and Jinn, 1999, in Mckay 2003) into the classroom gives second language learners enough confidence and language to talk about the different aspects of culture in which they live and find ways to develop a sense of consciousness and resistance in the students to bring about changes or “cultural revolution”, a term borrowed from Freire (1972), in the society when change is needed (Akbari 2008; Canagarajah, 1999).

The controversy over teaching culture is not just going on in English methodology circles, but the testing circles have been also undergoing deep changes with the advent of CP in the field. Shohamy argues for a reconsideration of the testing procedures followed in different institutions. She demands that the “cultural interests of monitoring groups “be accounted for in testing practices. She gives the example of Israeli Arabs who are deprived of their own local culture and content in schools and are required to study Jewish content and culture in schools in order to pass the exams and enter the university (2004).

As far as writing is concerned, some recent critics have argued against the claim that students should write in order to meet native speaker norms, the monolingualism and monoculturalism dimensions, instead of expressing their own “cultural identities” (Connor, 2003: see Kubota, 1999; Ramanathan and Atkinson, 1999; Kubota and Lehner, 2004). This sense of resistance against the native-speakerism can be brought about in the classroom through having students write about their own home culture or bringing it into the classroom through a variety of

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writing tasks. Because the teaching of culture involves “transmission of specific knowledge and sets of assumptions”, it can be really amenable to transmission through writing or having students write about it (Albertini, 1993). Again this concept of resistance can be brought about in another circle through altering testing procedures followed in the classroom in order to tap students’ writing abilities. Instead of assessing students’ knowledge on a target culture, the practitioners can assess their knowledge of their own culture, which is itself against linguistic imperialism and in line with principles of CP. What if the teachers would have different cultures from those of students? Under the circumstances, dialogue, one of the means used in CP, can be used as a tool to fill the gap between the students and teachers’ cultures (Gallegher, 2000).

Connor (2003) voices his concern over the narrow approach to writing pedagogy which sees writers’ identities as separate and identifiable coming from separate, identifiable cultures (See Atkinson, 1999; Kaplan, 1966; Leki, 2003; Scollon, 1997; Spack, 1997; Zamel, 1997). This view on culture as separate and identifiable, by implication, brings concepts of inferiority of some cultures and superiority of others associated with the history of their nations, hence English culture being lionized and presented as the best choice in the classroom.

Kubota proposes an approach namely “critical multiculturalism“ as an alternative to the traditional approaches to presenting culture in the classroom. Critical multiculturalism aims for social transformation. It is intended to raise students’ critical consciousness in order for them to be agents of change, bringing about social transformation. This kind of approach can be best integrated in the writing classroom or pedagogy and turn it into a critical writing pedagogy through explicitly taking account of racism and other forms of inequality, “problamization of difference“, considering “culture as a discursive construct“ and looking at it not just for the marginalized but for all the students (1999, 2004).

Like the controversy on how and what kind of culture to present in the classroom, the question of whether to use L1 in the class or not has been around for a long time. As far as the use of language in the class is concerned, two camps can be recognized. One is to outlaw the use of L1 in the classroom and the other one is to make “judicious use” (Akbari, 2008) of it. Some practitioners argue that the mere use of the target language makes the class more real

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and authentic. Some others claim that in a multilingual classroom it is practically impossible to take account of all first languages, and still some other ones try to follow first language studies and argue that because child first language learners have no access to another second language, L2 learners had better follow the same line and abandon the use of and exposure to L1 (Cook, 2001). But these claims or arguments against L1 use have not been proved scientifically yet, and seem to be no longer valid.

As there are some pros on the use of L1, there are also some cons on its use in the classroom. Looking at the use of L1 in classroom as an obstacle on the way of L2 learning has been challenged by critical pedagogy, and the exclusive use of target language is considered a kind of “linguistic imperialism” (Phillipson, 1992). To look at the issue from a different perspective, “An individual’s L1 is part of his identity and a force which has played a crucial role in the formation of that identity” (Akbari, 2008). Trying to blindly restrict the use of L1 in the classroom may have counterproductive effects, and is morally wrong, too. Moreover, abandoning L1 gives students a sense of inferiority and is not in one with their own identities (Nieto, 2002). Auerbach (1999) argues for “promoting the first language as a vehicle for cultural maintenance” among the different generations and social classes. Not only is the promotion of first language necessary for “cultural maintenance”, but also it is highly needed so as to challenge language death and resist linguistic imperialism.

In a multilingual world, teaching English without reference to the students’ L1 is a sign of disempowerment (Canagarajah, 2005). Rivera (1999) argues that students are more willing not to be silenced and bring in their experiences into the class with their first language, because they have experienced them through their first language and are more at ease to recollect or reflect upon them in this language. There have even been some different activities proposed such as having role-plays, reading dramas, and playing puppets through which students’ L1 can be completely integrated into the syllabus (Delpit, 2003).

To cut the long story short, “students’ languages are understood as mutually transformative rather than oppositional” (Zamel, 1997). This controversy over L1 use in the classroom has been transferred to writing pedagogy, too. Christensen (1999) encouraged her students to use their home language while writing since in this way they no longer harbour a feeling of

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inferiority. Ghahremani and Mirhosseini (2005) made use of Dialogue Journal Writing (DJW) as a tool for students' empowerment and the students were allowed to use Farsi (their L1) words where they couldn't locate the English equivalents. The students were told to choose a topic of their concern and interest, and then write about it without paying too much attention to grammar, spelling etc. The practice of journal writing was used in this study because "DJW grants students the freedom to disagree, hence, playing a major role in empowering them". One part of this disagreement may be the use of first language while writing because it is not consistent with the principles of traditional methods to teaching and managing classrooms. One of other activities in which L1 and L2 writing can be integrated is the one proposed by Cook (1999). In this kind of activity you can have students write reports in one of the languages after reading or listening to a series of interviews or different texts. The use of such activities produces a "multicompetent speaker" (Cook, 1999) rather than a false imitation of a native speaker, hence in this case it can be empowering and move towards social transformation.

The use of L1 in writing can also be interpreted as having one's voice in writing. This is what one of the participants in Zamel's (1982) study revealed: "when I write in my own language, I feel great because I can express my writing as part of my world. It's like painting. It materializes on a piece of paper, and other people can share what I feel ". Reid (2001) believes that planning and talking about the composition process and its content in L1 can lead students to be more confident when writing. Managing the writing assignment in L1, translating it into L1 and then writing it, thinking in L1 while writing and searching for lexical entries in L1 can be other tools for using L1 in the writing process (Wang and Wen, 2002; Woodall, 2002; Wang, 2003).

A word of caution should be in order here. When we talk about bringing students' language into the classroom, we should aim for the logical use of language, not an intuitive-based one. Akbari (2008) argues that the "judicious use of the students' language" can be one of the very first steps towards transformation in the society. Another important point is about the role of the teachers in this process of transformation. The idea of resistance and empowerment is transferred from the teachers to the students through different means like having dialogues with students, otherwise; the students will not be aware of their empowering potentials and

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feel helpless without a helping hand. As far as students' own culture and L1 are concerned, the teachers should be as informative as possible giving students the courage to make use of their cultures and L1 in the classroom, in this way be more in line with the notion of resistance and empowerment for the next stages of life or education.

3. Historicity and Problem posing

CP begins where students are at ; it is based on using students' present reality as a foundation for further learning rather than doing away with or belittling what they know and who they are.(Nieto,2002).The classroom instruction and content should be grounded in students' experiences and daily concerns (Buckingham and Pech,1976; Auerback, 1993; Brito et al., 2004; Fishman and McCarthy, 1996; Hasbrook, 2002; Katz, 1997; Raimes, 2002; Rode, 1995); hence they can have their say in planning the curriculum, in this way not viewed as passive students or depositors to be filled, but teachers in themselves ready to teach and share their experiences with other people participating in the learning process (Freire, 1972; Stoecker et al, 1993). Through introducing contexts which are familiar to the students, those which draw on students' experiences and daily problems, they can exercise empowerment (Reid, 2001; Christensen, 1999). In this view, students are no longer deemed white slates waiting to be written on, but pens or pencils ready to write and decide their own ideal lives.

Paulo Freire demands that “problem-posing theory and practice take man’s historicity as their starting point” (1972). When the students’ historicity, their experiences and daily concerns, are rightly accounted for in the curriculum and the classroom, they will no longer be considered illiterates or “empty vessels” (Freeman & Johnson, 1998) waiting to be nourished with the Inner-Circle countries’ historicity, rather they can appear in the guise of the teacher this time and share their historicity with other students and teachers. This sharing can then lead to reflection which is one of the very first steps in CP.

A true critical pedagogue can learn from students’ silence in the classroom (Carter, 1997) and through using a ‘problem-posing’ approach draw on “issues central to the lives of the students” (Frye, 1999). Giroux and McLaren (1992) believe that “student experience is the fundamental medium of culture, agency, and identity formation and must be given pre-eminence in emancipatory curriculum”. The importance of students’ experiences has been

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lately recognized by some teachers, but few efforts have been put in bringing it into the second language writing pedagogy. With this in mind we now turn to the importance of the theme, historicity, in writing pedagogy.

The theme of the 'historicity and problem-posing' is one of the central ones in the recent writing pedagogy since "engaging in literacy practices helps [sic] [the students] make sense of both their lives and social worlds, and provides [sic] them with a partial refuge from the harsh realities of their every day experiences "(Mahiri and Sablo, 1996). Vygotsky (1978) believes that "writing should be incorporated into a task that is necessary and relevant for life ". Writing is one of the essential tools that gives the students the chance to examine "one's own world and that of others "(Clark and Ivanic, 1997).

"Writing from and out of experience "(Lee, 2000) is at the heart of process approach to writing (Albertini, 1993). The "discovery approach " to writing is one of other central ones which focuses on students' personal experiences as starting point for writing (Kroll , 2001; Morrel, 2003). A lot of proponents of the expressionist approach to writing also demand that" the writing classroom work explicitly toward liberating students from the shackles of a corrupt society" (Berlin, 1988) through integrating the classroom syllabus with the students' experiences and lives. The kind of writing classroom that is informed by CP and the aforementioned approaches starts right from the students' experiences and daily problems in the society and moves immediately towards carrying social justice and transformation through writing (Morrel, 2003). In the writing classroom students should write "from the classroom outward to the community [and] from the community experience inward to the classroom" (Deans, 2000). It is right through writing that teachers can engage into dialogue with their students on their experiences and problems (Nieto, 2002), in this way negotiate on the problems they both face in the society and bring about changes, if necessary, in a large scale. Wharton in the book " Plain English " through presenting students' real life problems tries to empower the students and make them agents for social action (Greer , 1999). McDonough and Shaw (1993) think of free composition as one of the tools for writing about personal experiences and problems, Lowenstein et al.(1994) and Deans (2000) argue for the importance of journals for doing so , Pough (2002) exercises student empowerment (mainly black students) through having them write journals and autobiographies . Amy Lee (2000)

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talks about her Basic Writing class 8 years ago. In that class the students were required to reflect on a kind of experience or problem they had encountered in their lives and write it down in whatever genre they liked. One of the students called Maria wrote about the experience of being raped. In her essay she tried to gain the personal voice and then through sharing the experience with the readers gain a public voice, hence criticizing the society for the purpose of transformation. In another study by Pough (2002) the black students thought of writing as an essential tool for bringing about change in the society. The kind of procedure in this study was in this way that they read autobiographies by other oppressed people in their culture such as Brown and Newton, and after that were asked to write about their own experiences and problems in the society. This act of writing made them reflect more on their ancestors' lives and made them "explore their own worlds with the words they have at their disposal" (Ghahremani and Mirhosseini, 2005). These are but a few kinds of writing that can be used for the goal of empowerment because writing is a genre that in large part harbours this potential in different guises.

4. Problems with CP-Oriented Writing Classes

As there are certainly advantages in writing about personal experiences and daily concerns, there might be problems with this approach too. Scholes (...) raises issues with this approach on two grounds. The first problem is that having some knowledge of the personal experiences and problems does not necessarily mean that one can write about them automatically. Being cognizant of experiences and daily problems without knowing how to write is of little value, and this is perhaps one of the reasons we should be cautious about blindly integrating the students' experiences into the classroom without any consideration of their writing abilities and overall proficiency. The second one is that "the writer's self is simply not what most academic writing is about". There are some contexts where writing about personal experiences may prove of little value, and the academic context is one of those according to some scholars. This second view or problem is not accepted by the author, however; he believes that this may be the case with English for Specific Purposes (ESP), however; we can talk about critical ESP or EAP (see, Benesch, 2001).

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Some believe that those classrooms that are informed by CP are no longer writing classrooms (Yagelski, 1999), and the students in these classes appear to be “antagonistic toward one another” (Thelin, 2005), perhaps because of the conflicting experiences they have experienced. Some others claim that the critical classrooms seem to be more concerned with political transformation rather than teaching students how to write critically (Soles, 1998). Some other scholars believe that CP is unnecessarily “harmful” (Swoden, 2008) and is sometimes reduced to just some kind of autonomous learning (See Swoden, 2008; Akbari, 2008a, 2008b).

5. Concluding Remarks

CP is not all black and white, nor is it all essentialist or reductionist. It is more like a continuum having different stages in it leading to the last stage which is transformation of the status quo and creation of justice. Taking account of the students’ first languages and culture and bringing the students’ experiences into the curriculum can be considered as the first steps towards student emancipation and transformation. The different arguments for and against the use of L1 and “source culture” (Gortazzi and Jinn, 1999, in McKay 2003) were explained in the preceding sections of the paper and their accommodation in the writing classroom is a sign of empowerment, resistance, and a way of breaking away with the traditional methods of teaching that were dictated unidimensionally by native speakers. The second point for which another part of the paper argued was the recognition of the students’ experiences and daily problems in the writing pedagogy. Through bringing their experiences into the classroom they are no longer considered as “empty vessels” (Freeman & Johnson, 1999), rather experts so far as their experiences are concerned. This gives the students the chance to reflect upon their experiences through different writing tasks and bring about change wherever necessary. Among the various skills writing is selected in this paper for implementing the basic tenets of CP because of its special characteristics. Writing may not lead to social transformation immediately, but when it breaks “the culture of silence” (Ghahremani and Mirhosseini, 2005), it is a step towards empowerment and transformation. Through integrating writing with CP students and teachers all over the world can challenge the traditional atmosphere of the classroom and empower themselves so as to create a voice of their own.

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