

Critical pedagogy in language teaching

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Critical pedagogy in language teaching is a perspective in language curriculum theory and instructional practice that supports and advances teaching and the study of languages in ways that would promote social justice. In this case, the popular term social justice is based in one or more critiques of present-day society (or societies) that reflect the interests of the working class, women, non-heterosexuals, ethnic minorities, marginalized peoples, and includes perspectives that valorize environmental conservation and peace. 'Critique' refers to systematic and constructive criticism based on empirical and theoretical study of society, language, and the person reflecting alternative, progressive, or radical theories of societies, individuals, and languages. Language is understood here broadly, as having both structural and functional dimensions, socially implicated as discourse and thus involved in the construction of individuals and the maintenance and change of societal structures.

The term 'critical pedagogy' was attached to the work of Brazilian literacy educator and curriculum specialist Paulo Freire (1958, 1967, 2004), its central figure, during the late 1970s, that is, some years after his writings became popular outside his home country. According to Henry Giroux (<http://www.freireproject.org/content/henry-giroux-interview>), he and Freire discussed what useful label could be attached to this line of work and considered 'radical pedagogy', but discarded it as too challenging. They substituted the less transparent, perhaps more inclusive term 'critical' for 'radical'. This suggests a connection to the area of social theory known as 'critical theory', but the link is not close in early work in this area (Blake & Masschelein, 2003). Given the breadth of developments in this area, the very-longstanding and unconfined term 'radical pedagogy'

might have been a better choice (Gore, 1998; cf. Buckingham, 1998; Wright, 1989), but the fact remains that ‘critical pedagogy’ is the most widespread term for social justice oriented tendencies in applied linguistics and in language teaching. (For more explicitly theoretical or disciplinary understandings in applied linguistics, we also have the term ‘critical applied linguistics’; Pennycook, 1990, 2001.)

Initially, Freire’s critical pedagogy was an approach to first and second language literacy based in Catholic, progressive, and radical critiques of society, in which literacy was to be taught in such a way that the poor and the working class could interpret reality so as to be able to act on it to improve their lives. Class was the primary unit of analysis in Freire’s work, along with the idea that the ‘human vocation’ involved one’s ability to care for others and improve oneself (cf. Taylor, 1993).

What critical pedagogy has become is much broader than that. Freire originally thought of oppression as mostly what is experienced by the working class at the hands of the ruling class. But as radical social thinking and theorizing developed along with the growth of social movements over the decades of the end of the twentieth century, other important aspects or sites of oppression became more visible and organized. Thus the feminist movement entered its second wave after the late 1960s; race-based social critique became more obvious; gender orientation became recognized as a site of oppression and a place of pedagogy; and issues of peace and environmental protection all developed curricular manifestations. These areas developed instructional and theoretical manifestations within applied linguistics and language teaching. Mainstream critical pedagogy continued to develop as well (e.g., Apple, 1986, 2009; Giroux, 1983, 2001; McLaren, 2007).

Core elements of practice, both in Freire’s L1 literacy work and in L2 language teaching of a critical nature, can be sketched without in any way suggesting that there is one fixed “Method” implied by these elements. One central feature is that the elements of the language curriculum should relate to the issues of the students’ life and the things in their life that are problematic, which they might be able to change and improve through the

tool of literacy or an additional language, and the changed consciousness that would come from that. When Freire's original literacy courses were delivered within the students' home communities, the instructional team spent time living in the community, to develop an ethnographic critical needs analyses. A characteristic feature was and still is the use of visual images (pictures or photos) or realia, concerning aspects of the students' life. Pictures may be used as projective devices; through commenting on them and discussing them, students develop or articulate some aspects of the topics or language content they wish to learn, that they wish to be able to command. In addition, since one underlying goal of the approach is to foster the freedom and ability to act of the students, the students themselves play a substantial role in the development of curriculum content and even of materials.

L2 specialists began to take up Freire's work from the late 1970s on, but much more substantially after the mid 1990s. Foreign language teaching in the US early witnessed publications identifying a critical pedagogy for languages such as French or Spanish in the high school or university (Crawford, 1978, 1981, 1982). Crawford derived principles for language critical pedagogy from Freire's work, and these illustrate core values in critical pedagogy as well as alerting teachers to some of the challenges of implementing it are. They include -

- a) the purpose of education is to develop critical thinking by presenting [students'] situation to them as a problem so that they can perceive, reflect and act on it.
- b) the content of curriculum derives from the life situation of the learners as expressed in the themes of their reality
- c) the learners produce their own learning materials
- d) the task of planning is first to organize generative themes and second to organize subject matter as it relates to those themes
- e) the teacher participates as a learner among learners
- f) the teacher contributes his/her ideas, experiences, opinions, and perceptions to the dialogical process [of the course]
- g) the teacher's function is one of posing problems

h) the students possess the right to and power of decision making.

The most prominent early adopter of Freire's ideas in ESL was Elsa Auerbach, whose publications continue to be very important for teachers who wish to know what critical language pedagogy looks like in practice (1996; Auerbach & Wallerstein, 1987, Wallerstein & Auerbach, 2004; Wallerstein, 1983 a,b,c). Newer proponents of critical pedagogy in world languages have provided useful analyses and advocacy (Osborn, 2000; Reagan & Osborn, 1998, 2002, cf Kubota, e.g., 1999) and some accounts of actual short pedagogical initiatives (e.g., Ohara, Saft & Crookes, 2001). The area has also expanded into more academic language teaching (Benesch, 2001, 2009) and more research-oriented publications (e.g., Norton & Toohey, 2004). In its emphasis on the needs of students and their active role in their education it is consistent with other recent developments such as task-based language teaching and learner autonomy.

Feminist pedagogy has been promoted in language teaching particularly by Vandrick (1994, 1998), who draws on elements of feminist process to describe feminist classroom participation practices, which ensure female students have equal time and assist and direct male students in fulfilling this goal. Feminist language curriculum means the teacher makes sure the classroom content is bias-free, avoids stereotyping, and puts women-related matters at the center of content.

For language teaching, race as a form or site of oppression has been worked on only quite recently. A special issue of the flagship journal *TESOL Quarterly* was devoted to it (2006, see also Curtis & Romney, 2006). Oppression based on societal insistence on a particular sexual orientation and oppression of those not conforming (heterosexism) has been recognized by radical educational practitioners, has begun to manifest in some theoretical literature (e.g., Pinar, 1998), and has produced both practical and theoretical work in language teaching (Nelson, 1999, 2006, 2008).

It has been suggested that critical pedagogies are inappropriate for use in some cultures. This view wrongly generalizes temporary historical-cultural conditions (Shin & Crookes, 2005a) or the characteristics of some parts of mainstream schooling to cultures or, to

countries or cultures as a whole (cf. Holliday, 1999, Kubota, 1999). Reports of language critical pedagogy tended to favor ESL settings, though an increasingly number of explorations are reported (e.g., Shin & Crookes, 2005b) concerning the teaching of English in EFL contexts.

The number of publications on language critical pedagogy continues to grow, reflecting (though perhaps exceeding) practice. In recent years the area has acquired a journal (*Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*) and a professional society (the International Society for Language Studies) notably hospitable to ideas of critical language pedagogy and associated positions. A research agenda for the area has become clearly specified (Crookes, 2009). The conceptual and theoretical expansion of the area, as well as the growth of language educational programs both as well as inside a public sector that is itself no longer monolithic allows the proponents of language critical pedagogy to view the future for their initiatives with optimism.

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