Critical Pedagogy and Race in TESOL

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Abstract

Having been initiated by the work of Paolo Freire in Brazil and other South American countries, critical pedagogy has continued to influence the English language teaching profession since the 1980s. Focusing on social change and social justice via education, critical pedagogy views education as a political activity. On the edges of the spectrum, education can maintain the status quo or challenge the social, political, economic, and cultural structures locally and globally. In this regard, language becomes a crucial element in maintaining or challenging the status quo. In English language teaching, the development of the field is directly related to colonialism and recently to globalism. Through its aims and content, English language teaching needs to be critically evaluated in terms of the values being transmitted in schools, training centres, textbook, media, and so on. Moreover, although learning the English language is a global phenomenon, especially textbooks used in language teaching continues to marginalise various races, with a colour blindless mentality. Critical multiculturalism can be an organic response to this distorted perspective, whether it is made consciously or unconsciously.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, language teaching, values, multiculturalism

Introduction

Critical pedagogy has been used in the English language teaching profession since the 1980s but it has gained more popularity in the last ten to fifteen years (Akbari, 2008). Critical pedagogy is interested in social change and social justice via education as the world we live in is reflected in the education where the education serves the interests of our social system and discrimination in terms of race, class and/or gender (Grioux, 1983). Education, by its nature, is a political activity (Freire, 1973). Therefore, critical pedagogy in language teaching is "about connecting the word with the world" and acknowledging the language as, not just as a system

but as an ideology to expand language teaching environment into social, cultural and more importantly into political dynamics of language use (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 70).

   This can be observed in educational policies at national level when the policies change with the change in the majority of the parliament but when it comes to TESOL, it is also ideological, historical and political because the development of the field is directly related to colonialism, power relations and the values carried as well as continued via English (Pennycook, 1998). Especially commercial textbooks in the field which are widely used tend to avoid 'controversial' topics and also serve to reinforce some stereotypical values notably about race and gender issues (Gray, 2002).

Discussion

Intrinsically, TESOL involves interactions between racially, linguistically and culturally different speakers and teaching a language carries the messages of the racialized images of the characters in the textbooks (Kubota & Lin, 2006). In English language teaching, however, race is not a widely discussed topic and studies usually link race to other issues of critical pedagogy like gender and class (Jorge, 2012). Within this perspective, critical pedagogy is even criticised for emphasising class relations or gender over racial issues (Lynn, 2005). Freire, the author of the Pedagogy of the Oppressed and one of the leading figures of critical pedagogy, has also taken his part on this criticism for his admiration to Gilberto Freyre, who was denounced for his white supremacist position and for his selective hearing on what racial scholars had said (Allen, 2005). As a response, critical race pedagogy and critical white studies are some of the approaches that mainly deal with racial issues. Critical race theory has been used in education to critically examine educational policies and related racial issues in all school subjects and language teaching which shows that native speaker concept is used as a tool to discriminate non-native people. As an example, counter storytelling is one of the methods used in critical race theory to expose, analyse and challenge the racial discrimination in the stories by talking about the experiences of the people who are usually silenced (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

   White supremacy has been widely discussed and research shows that non-white majority of some larger states in the United States are not represented in the school systems, where the curricula resist to change and continue to promote white supremacy (de Los Rios, Lopez, & Morrel, 2015). Critical white studies are interested in the social construction of whiteness and white privilege and show that prevailing colour blindness is reinforced by the white as they use it to sustain the privileged position in the society as well as othering some via a number of instruments including language (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Textbooks in TESOL have been criticised for promoting the idealised native speaker concept via whiteness, which results in the language learners' failure to understand the racial realities that prevent them to reflect on their local contexts as well as perceiving global racial realities (Jorge, 2012).

   At this point, it worth talking on Skerrett (2011)'s research on secondary English teachers, in which she reveals the demand from teachers to collaborate in their professional development for more effective, context-specific knowledge and skills in order to work with their students on racial issues. Language teachers should be aware of that the textbooks, posters in the classrooms and movies are full of success stories and accomplishment of white people; language teachers should question with their students why 'underdeveloped' African villagers live in huts, not cottages in the 'developed' countryside of a Western country; why some beliefs are called superstitions, not religions like their Western counterparts or why an Indian wears costume, not clothing (Monchinski, 2008). Jorge (2012) talks about textbooks and other materials used in the classroom, which are far from causing a critical reflection on racial issues that more or less directly affect the formation of both students and teachers' racial identities, and gives examples of the black population in her country, Brasil, where a member of fifty per cent of the black population of the country cannot have any positive attainment for his/her racial

identity during his/her language learning process. This colour blindness of the TESOL classrooms actually fails to utilise the opportunities on which learning can be built, even if there is an international environment (Mackie, 2009).

Other issues that should be investigated include the institutional racism, which refers to the advantage of being a white native English speaker for hiring English teachers as well as epistemological racism which dominates the field by influencing the way we think, analyse and educate throughout a European White civilisation and determining the legitimate linguistic and cultural knowledge in the textbooks (Kubota & Lin, 2006).

Conclusion

Critical multiculturalism is offered as a response to deal with racial issues in TESOL (Kubota, 2002). Critical multiculturalism means going beyond dealing with multiculturalism at a superficial or liberal level and demands from the students to study how the power in the classroom and society shapes them. Liberal multicultural discourses do not actually help with their "representations of immigrant success stories and perceived racial and cultural differences among students" (Chun, 2014, p. 109). By critically examining racial, power and gender issues; critical multiculturalism aims to bridge the gap between minorities and dominant culture (Monchinski, 2008). As the last word, critical pedagogies should give students hope by showing them that transformation through education is possible (Benesch, 2001).

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