

# Critical Pedagogy in English Classrooms

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to understand and critically analyses the various underlying theoretical constructs to evolve a critical pedagogy of English in Indian classrooms language leaning is not an isolated process, it is an amalgamation of multiple voices and multiple identities. These voices and identities are quite different from the 'cultural values' imbibed and inculcated through English. So critically pedagogy builds a bridge between L1 (Language 1 or Mother Tongue) and L2 (English) by giving space to multiple voices and multiple identities and transforming language learning into an agent of social change.

Keywords: Critical Pedagogy, Social Change, L1 (Language 1), L2 (Language 2), domains, multimodal, transition, transformation, semiotic visual, verbal.

Critical pedagogy in education aims to examine educational policy and practice in relation to exploitation and hegemony. The struggles waged in society against such exploitation come to occupy a centre stage in educational discourse, ultimately paving the way for informed practice in classroom.

So looking at sociology of English in India, critical pedagogy aims to question 'deprivation' on the grounds of not knowing a language.

As apple (1979), comments: "critical educators must act in concert with the programmes, social movements their work supports or in movements against the rightist assumption and policies they critically analyse".

Apple (1979) further identifies following tasks which a critical pedagogue must engage with.

- (1) It must 'bear witness to negativity'. That is, one of its primary functions is to illuminate the ways in which educational policy and practice are connected to the relations- in the larger society.
- (2) "In engaging in such critical analysis, it also must point to contradictions and to spaces of possible action. Thus, its aim is to critically examine current realities with a conceptual / political framework that emphasizes the spaces in which counter-hegemonic actions can be or are now going on.
- (3) "At times, this also requires, a redefinition of what counts as 'research'. Here I mean acting as secretaries to those groups of people and social movements who are now engaged in challenging existing relation of unequal power or in what elsewhere has been called 'non-reformist reforms'. This is exactly the task that was taken on in think descriptions of critically democratic school practices in 'Democratic schools'

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and in the critically supportive descriptions of the transformative reforms such as the citizen school and participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil".

- (4) "When Gramsci (1971) argued that one of the tasks of truly counter hegemonic education was not to throw out 'elite knowledge' but to reconstruct its form and content so that it served genuinely progressive social needs. Thus, we should not be engaged in a process of what might be called intellectual suicide. That is, there are serious intellectual (and pedagogic) skills in dealing with the histories and debates surrounding the epistemological, political and educational issues involved in justifying what counts as important knowledge. These are not simple or income inconsequential issues and the practical and intellectual / political skills of dealing with them have been well developed. However, they can atrophy, if they are not used. We can give back these skills by employing them to assist communities in thinking about this, learn from them and engage in mutually pedagogic dialogues, that enable decisions to be made in terms of both, the short term and long term interests of oppressed peoples".
- (5) "In the process, critical work has the task of keeping traditions of radical work alive. In the face of organized attack on the 'collective memories' of difference and struggle, attack that make it increasingly difficult to retain academic and social legitimacy for multiple critical approaches that have proven so valuable in countering dominant narratives and relations, it is absolutely crucial that these traditions be kept alive, renewed and when necessary, criticized for their conceptual, empirical, historical and political silences or limitations. This involves being cautious of reductionism and essentialism and ask us to pay attention to what Fraser (1997) has called both politics of recognition. This includes not only keeping theoretical, empirical, historical and political traditions alive but very importantly, extending and supportively criticizing them. And it also involves keeping alive the dreams, Utopian vision, and 'non-reformist reforms' that are so much a part of these radical traditions".
- (6) "Keeping tradition alive and also supportively criticizing with when they are not adequate to deal

with current realities cannot be done unless we ask 'for whom are we keeping them alive'? All of the things I have mentioned before in this tentative taxonomy of tasks require the relearning or development and use of varied or new skills of working at many levels with multiple groups. Thus, journalistic and media skills, academic and popular skills, and the ability to speak to very different audiences are increasingly crucial".

- (7) "Finally, critical educators must act in concert with the progressive a social movements their work supports or in movements against the rightist assumption and policies they critically analyze. Thus, scholarship in critical education or critical pedagogy does imply becoming an organic intellectual' in the Gramscian (1971) sense of the term'.

These seven tasks meant to be achieved: through critical pedagogy as delineated by Apple (98) essentially aims at countering hegemony of any kind, in our case the hegemony of English.

Studies on cultural and linguistic invasions suggest that people resort to subversion to resist the imposition of a second language or a language other than the mother tongue. This is not done in active sense but by defining the 'operational domain' of the other language. So on the surface of it, it might be useful to learn English for survival (mainly economic), but it cannot move beyond this 'operational domain'.

As Krishnawamy (1998) comments: "domain restriction and switching have their motivation, and, may be, they enable the common people to preserve their inner self and the core aspects of life 'unaffected1 and 'stable', in case of civilizations that have traditions established through restricting domains'.

So if there are various 'domain' of English in India, an argument can be built to look at English in a multi-modular fashion. It is customary to associate English with science, technology, judiciary and administration but it has not been able to encroach on the social domain much. Customs such as ceremonies of birth, marriages, deaths, religions functions and rituals, festivities and interaction in the family and the peer group. These core aspects of life remain untouched by English, for the majority of Indians.

Krishnaswamy (98) sums up the situation: "Only a microscopic minority living in pockets that are spread all over a country of

sub continental size (but that section of the population is visible because the total population of the country is very large-and visibility goes with power and status) has been absorbed by English and English education, the vast majority seems to know how to handle the cultural osmosis', how to contain alien languages, how to control invading influences, and how to absorb and manipulate them to its advantage without any clash".

Taking an example' of 'modules' or use of different language at different layers of existence. An inhabitant of Bengal and a Muslim, spoke Bengali as the-mother tongue, used Urdu/Arabic as language of the religion, and was a trader and paid taxes to a Hindu King. This has been a never ending process of transition or a multi-modular operation.

The multi-modular operation helps us to account for following phenomenon:

- (a) The absence of pidginization in Indian's English.
- (b) The existence of a variety that can be called unindianized English, which is advantageous in several areas like Science and technology, diplomacy and international trade, or employment and mobility.
- (c) The ambivalence towards 'Indian English to accept it or not to accept it, to use it or not, why use it when there is no status or monetary benefit involved and
- (d) The admiration for, and the desire to use English with a 'touch of India' in certain domain - which expressions translated from Indian languages or Indian words and phrases with some stylistic features, and with semantic and cultural association (Krishnaswami, 1998).

The multi-modular acceptance of English by restricting its operational domain is of particular significance to critical pedagogy in English teaching, because first and foremost it calls for recognition of 'multiple identities' keeping in mind 'plural diversity' of the nation and its people.

**MULTI-MODAL PEDAGOGIES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE : FIRST STEPS TOWARDS CRITICALITY:** Multi-modal pedagogy essentially involves multiple semiotic-modes like visual, verbal and performative, which are drawn from learners' histories and identities.

The wits multi-literacies project started in South Africa in 1996,

is an apt example of multi-modal language teaching. Pipa Stein and Denise Newfield (2004) explain the rationale of multi-literacies project in following words: "our project has focussed on ways in which literature, language, and visual arts education can be dynamically oriented towards developing a democratic culture where previously there was none using examples from actual classroom practices in early primary, secondary and tertiary levels, with children from diverse languages and histories, we argue that pedagogies that actively work to "shift the gaze" of learners and teachers within a critical framework can create new publics and in turn, create new forms of accountability and self-reflexivity.

Let us take the 'oral' skills, only 'talk' or 'speaking<sup>1</sup> cannot be counted as a language skill. Varied ways of representation, visual, the gestural', and action are as important as talk, in multi-lingual and multi-modal approaches any communication event involves 'simultaneous' use of all these modes.

"The key notion in any semiotic code is the 'sign', which is comprised of forms (signifiers) such as colour, perspective, line, and movement that are used to realize meanings (signifieds) signmakers, within a particular socio cultural context, use the forms they consider most apt for the expression of their meaning, in whatever medium they have to hand. The interests of the Signmaker, at the moment of making the sign, lead her or him to choose an aspect or feature of the object being represented as critical for representation. The resources used for representing the object have histories, they are 'at once the products of cultural histories and the cognitive resources we use to create meaning in the production and interpretation of visual and other messages" (Maureen Kendrick and others, 09).

So the theoretical position that underlies a multi-modal approach to language learning is that all layers of meaning and meaning making are equally significant and this recognition aids in evolving a critical pedagogy for social transformation, by questioning the hegemony of 'one meaning', one English (as opposed to many English).

The introduction of English in India during the colonial regime and the role it has been playing ever since in maintaining the 'hegemony' of those who know the language, and the inherent desire of the masses to restrict or subvert its hegemony by defining its 'operational domain<sup>1</sup>', thereby having a multi-modular usage of language and how this fact can help us

in evolving a more ‘inclusive’ ways of teaching English as a second language, so that this hegemony can be questioned or a critical enquiry can be offset, to bring in change’, brings us to the more specific “aspect of ELT practise in the classroom. How is it to be achieved? This is the most challenging problem for educational practitioners, and not much has been, done till date. The question of many Voices’ getting acceptance in English classrooms, or use of multi-lingualism as a resource is a tricky one, as it stands in sharp contrast many of the prevalent practices in ELT.

### **Transformation through Critical pedagogy in ELT classroom:**

It is an attitude to language teaching which involves bringing issues, from wider social context to the language classroom and aims at social transformation through education in general, and language education in particular.

“The practical implications of critical pedagogy in language teaching has not been harnessed fully, mainly because it is still fighting to find a space in discourse on methodology research. The colonial legacy of language as a cultural hegemonic tool, brings with it, its own pedagogy, overriding the diverse linguistic environments which vary from state to state, school to school and so on. Critical pedagogy not only aims at accommodating these diversities in language classroom, but also in empowering and improving the lives of those who study English as a second language. Once the aim of teaching L2 becomes this, subsequent methodology can be developed”. (Akbari, 08)

Critical pedagogy is not a method, its an attitude. Once attitude changes things fall in place.

“The concept of critical pedagogy (CP) has been around in the ELT for almost two decades (Canagarajah, 05), but it has only been recently that a heightened interest in its principles and practical implications has been seen. It has to be conceded that discussions on CP has been limited to its rationale and not much has been done to bring it down to the actual world” of classroom practice, for which it was originally intended”. (Akbari, 08)

“Unlike most of the other concepts and ideas one encounters in the literature on la teaching, CP is not a theory, but a way of ‘doing1 learning and teaching (Canagarajah, 01). As Pennycock (2001) puts it ‘It is teaching with an attitude1. What critical pedagogues are after is the transformation of society through language teaching” (Kumaradivelu, 06).

It this regard aims of language teaching cannot be seen in isolation from aims of education. Critical pedagogy essentially deals with question of social justice and social change through education. Critical pedagogues argue that educational systems are reflection of the societal systems within which they operate and since in all social system, we have discrimination and marginalization in terms of race, social class, or gender (Giroux, 1983), the same biases are reproduced in educational systems.

CP puts the classroom context into the wider social context with the belief that ‘what happens in classroom should end up making a difference outside the classroom1 (Baynham, 06)”. (Akbari, 08)

In language teaching, critical practice is about connecting the word with the world. It is about recognizing language as ideology, not just system. It is about extending the educational space to the social, cultural and political dynamics of language use’. (Kumaradivelu, 06).

“The political implications of education, in general and L2 teaching in particular, might not be evident to many professionals, teaching English, is teaching a new system of communication, and it does not have much political critical significance. The problem is, however, that any language is a part of the wider Semitic system within which it was shaped and is infused with ideological, historical and political symbols and relations (Penny Cook 2001)” (As in Akbari, 08).

If we look back upon the history and its close connection with the spread of colonialism, we find ourselves pausing and pondering and admitting that English is not an innocent language’, even in newly decolonised states it became a hegemonic tool, as in case of India.

Exposing some of the values that underlie the spread and promotion of English, and questioning some of the assumption based on which the profession currently operates are at the heart of CP and discussions dealing with linguistic imperialism (Pennycook, 98).

The discourse of CP, however, is the discourse of liberation and hope. It is the discourse of liberation since it question the legitimacy of accepted power relations and recognises the necessity of going beyond social constraints.

If ELT has to make- a difference, than the totality of the experiences of learners needs to be addressed.

Language teachers can play a more active social role by including themes from the wider society in their classes and by drawing the attention of their students to the way marginalised people feel and act.

"Breaking from-the colonial past, English has now turned into an international language and due to the scope of its application both geographically and communicatively, it has developed certain features which are not part of any specific national characters.

It has become, de-nationalized and renationalized as a result of its spread as the world lingua franca (Sridhar and Sridhar, 1994). In this situation most of the communication takes place between people who are themselves the so called non-native speakers of English and with a distinct cultural identity of their own" (Akbari, 08).

In most communicative settings, people try to communicate their own cultural values and conceptualization, not those of the target language.

From a critical perspective, an individuals. li is a force that has shaped the identify of the person.

"By including more of the learners first language in L2 settings and through judicious use of students Li as a teaching aid, language teachers can create the context, where the first steps towards empowerment and positive social change can be taken" (Akbari, 08).

## Conclusion

ELT classrooms need to give space to multi-modalities and multiple voices to evolve a meaningful critical pedagogy.

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