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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the issue of the relationship between critical pedagogy and English as a foreign language (EFL) in Venezuela. Teacher-researchers have come to see the issues confronting nonnative educators in ELT as a more important issue than in previous years. They are particularly concerned about the current situation in Venezuela, especially teacher education programs and how well these programs address student teachers' critical awareness about the role of English seen from a broader socio-cultural context. This paper specifically investigates, through a survey of ELT professionals, Venezuela's teachers' perceptions on critical pedagogy and their role as EFL teacher educators. The paper also provides a background on ELT in Venezuela and critical pedagogy and ELT in particular. ELT professionals were asked about their roles as providers/givers of knowledge, and about their roles as facilitators to language learning. It is concluded that Venezuelans, and others, need to develop their own textbooks and materials, and not just rely on texts imported from the United States, Britain, Canada, or Australia, and to encourage life-long learning. (Contains 16 references.) (KFT)

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Critical Pedagogy and Empowering in Teacher Education in Venezuela

by
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Introduction

This paper addresses the issue of the relationship between Critical Pedagogy and English as Foreign Language (EFL) in Venezuela. As EFL teachers, we have taught English for 20 years, both in high school and college. Currently, we are teacher educators working in the English departments of two major public universities in Venezuela, one in the west, and the other in the central part of the country. Our interest in Critical pedagogy and ELT emerged as we shared experiences with a group of NNESTs, in a graduate seminar we took with Dr. K. Samimy at The Ohio State University last spring. Carmen has been working toward a Ph D in Foreign and Second Language Education, and Luisa Cristina is a visiting scholar on a sabbatical license. During that seminar, we realized that over the past years of our teaching praxis, we were merely concerned in developing prospective teachers' communicative competence, which means that our efforts were aimed at helping them master the linguistic and pragmatic components of the language. By doing so, we were following the norms imposed by the curriculum of our teacher education programs. However, it was not only until last Spring when we read scholars such as Pennycook (1994), Phillipson (1992) and Braine (1999) edited book on "NonNative Educators in ELT" that we started to reflect and question our role as EFL teachers with regards to issues of race, accent, power, and language.

Our reflections led us to examine the current situation of ELT in Venezuela, particularly regarding the curriculum of teacher education programs and how well these program address student teachers' critical awareness about the role of English seen from a broader socio-cultural context. Therefore, we decided to find out about our colleagues' perceptions on Critical Pedagogy and their role as EFL teacher educators.

Having explained our motivation to write this paper, next we will provide some background on ELT in Venezuela. Then, we will discuss Critical Pedagogy and ELT. Thirdly, we will present the analysis of the questionnaire we administered to Venezuelan teacher educators. Finally, we will consider some of the implications of this study for teacher education programs.

English Language Teaching in Venezuela

In Venezuela, English as a foreign language (EFL) is a mandatory subject in the National Curriculum for high schools. Traditionally, English has been the foreign language Venezuelans have studied in high school. English is taught in junior (seventh, eighth, ninth grades Basic School) and senior high school (fourth and fifth year). The time devoted to English class ranges from 4 to 2 hours per week.

According to the Official Bulletin of the Ministry of Education, English is the language most commonly spoken all over the world. “It [English] has become a universal language” (Official Bulletin, 1987, 17). For this reason, English is part of the requirements to get the high school Diploma.

In 1987, the Venezuelan Ministry of Education introduced a reform in the Curriculum for teaching English in the high schools. According to that reform, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach substituted the traditional methods (mainly, grammar translation and audiolingual methods) being used up to the middle 80s. From this perspective, the goal for Venezuelan students to learn English is to be able to use the language for communicative purposes. The need for studying English as a mandatory subject is stated in the Official Bulletin released by the Ministry of Education in 1987 as follows: “To offer students another language that allows them to communicate with people from different countries. To provide students with

an instrument that allows them to have a direct access to scientific, technological and humanistic knowledge” (p.17).

The Official Bulletin clearly describes that language is a social phenomenon and therefore, it serves communicative purposes. Accordingly, the study of EFL involves both oral and written communication, so that students are able to understand both oral and spoken language, and at the same time use the language in order to communicate with other people.

To attain this goal, English as a foreign language teachers (EFL) need to acquire the necessary competence to teach the target language for communicative purposes. Thus, a major concern in language teacher education programs should be the prospective teachers’ preparation to use CLT in their EFL classes. However, traditionally, many teacher education programs tend to focus on theoretical pedagogical knowledge, and on English language skills based on grammar, phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon of the language. Tedick & Walker (1995) state that the pervasive view of language as “object,” a paralyzing focus on methodology, and a continued failure to link languages and culture are three major areas of problems in foreign language and teacher education (p.500). Generally, language teaching has often been fragmented and decontextualized, teacher-centered, unrelated to the community and to the students’ needs and interests, mainly concerned with the “how” (methodology) about teaching grammar (linguistic competence) rather than on the “why” “where” and “who” of instruction (Crandall, 1999; Freeman, 1989; 2000; Tedick & Walker, 1995). Teaching is a socially constructed practice shaped by specific historical, social and cultural factors (Vygostky, 1978). Kachru (1982) contends that in most of the outer circle the focus of ELT is on applied linguistics, i.e., theoretical knowledge about syntax, phonology, and lexicon

Critical Pedagogy and ELT

Over the last decades, technology and globalization have contributed to increase the spread of English as an International Language (EIL). By the end of the twentieth century, and in the onset of the twenty first century, the power of English has dominated all areas of human knowledge. In the field of SLA a new perspective has emerged from the work of scholars such as Phillipson (1992), and Pennycook (1994, 1996) who question the apolitical neutrality of EIL. They advocate that language is not neutral nor is language teaching practice. Both language and teaching involve politics and culture. In other words, ELT is embedded and situated in a political and socioeconomic context that extends beyond the traditional linguistic knowledge.

According to Freire (1970), one of the leading scholars in the area of critical pedagogy, voice, social transformation, and agency should be major goals of education. Freire, as well as Pennycook, argue against the prescriptive traditional educational methods where the educator perpetuates the relations of power and domination and constitutes the authority in the classroom, while the learners are passive recipients of knowledge. Mayo (2000) nicely paraphrases Freire's thought, "The prescriptive mode of pedagogy alienates learners from the material to be learned. It also facilitates a process of what Freire calls "cultural invasion" because the learner is uncritically exposed to ideas imposed from above, namely, ideas that form part of the dominant culture." (p.263).

From our point of view, Critical Pedagogy argues against the traditional Behaviorist and Psychological paradigms that have dominated applied linguistics, and where language is studied as an "object" from an apolitical stance. Critical Pedagogy situates ELT in the students' reality in order to question and challenge the socio-cultural and historical aspects involved in learning

English as a lingua franca in the world. Critical Pedagogy means understanding that behind the teaching of English, there are also issues of power, social inequalities, and market interests from the Center to the Periphery.

ELT and Critical Pedagogy in Venezuela

As we mentioned before, Venezuelan EFL teachers have not been trained to address the sociopolitical aspects linked to their teaching practices. Teacher education programs generally focus on the development of the linguistic components of the language. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to reflect on teachers' ideological assumptions about teaching and learning English, and to discuss the possible implications of critical pedagogy in ELT in teacher education programs in the Venezuelan context. To attain this goal, the authors, first, conducted a literature review on the topic of critical pedagogy and ELT in Venezuela. Not surprisingly, research done in this area is nonexistent. Therefore, a short open-ended questionnaire was designed to find out about the perceptions on critical pedagogy and ELT of 14 teacher educators who work in the English Department of two major public universities in the country. (See appendix A)

The results obtained from this questionnaire seem to be completely parallel to the description of the teacher education language programs described above. In other words, in these programs characterized by theory over practice, prospective teachers are never faced with questions regarding the relationship between language and power. Nor are they aware that behind the benefits of learning EIL there also issues of power and inequality. Paraphrasing Pennycook (1994), in most cases, English syllabuses are seen as a canonical truth to be handed on to our students, rather than as something to be negotiated, challenged and appropriated.

Data Collection

As it was mentioned earlier, a questionnaire containing four items regarding personal information (educational level, experience in English-speaking countries, teaching experience, and proficiency level), and three open-ended questions concerning their role as English teachers, the relationship between EFL and Critical Pedagogy, and the role of English in Venezuela, was given to 14 teacher educators in the English departments in two major universities in Venezuela. For this study, the subjects were assigned a pseudonym to protect the confidentiality of their responses. Table 1 below describes the personal characteristics of these teachers.

Table 1

Background of the Participants

Participants	Educational Level	Studies in an English-speaking Country	Years Teaching EFL	Perceived proficiency level
Ms. Brito	MA (linguistics)	yes	25	Advanced
Ms. Medina	MA (Applied Linguistics)	yes	14	Advanced
Mr. Torres	Bachelor (Ed. English)	no	5	Advanced
Ms. Moreno	MA (Educational Management)	no	10	Advanced
Ms. Páez	MA (Applied Linguistics)	yes	4	Advanced
Mr. Soto	MA (Linguistics)	yes	30	(no answer)
Ms. Díaz	Bachelor (Ed. English)	no	10	Intermediate
Ms. Rojas	MA (Education, Communication, &	yes	14	Advanced

Ms. Pérez	Technology) Bachelor (Ed. English)	no	10	Advanced
Mr. Sánchez	Bachelor (Ed. English)	no	10	Advanced
Ms. Machado	Bachelor (Ed. English)	no	05	Advanced
Mr. López	MA (Linguistics)	yes	40	Near native
Ms. Méndez	MA (Education Administration)	yes	19	Advanced
Ms. Riera	Bachelor (Ed. English)	yes	21	Near native

From the data above, it can be seen that the majority of teachers hold an M.A (36% in applied linguistics and linguistics, and 21% in Education in different areas). The rest of the teachers (43%) hold a Bachelor in Education major English. From those holding an MA, except in one case, they have had experience in studying abroad, particularly in the U. S. According to the years of experience in teaching EFL, it can be said that all of them are experienced teachers ,since they have been teaching for more than 4 years. Even more, 11 out of 14 have been practicing teachers for more than 10 years. Concerning their perceived proficiency, ten considered themselves as “Advanced,” two “Near native,” one “Intermediate,” and one did not provide any answer.

Findings

In the analysis of the three open-ended questions, we read each participant’s answer and tried to group them in categories. In relation to question # 7, “According to your opinion, what is your role as an English teacher? Describe briefly. ” Two categories were recurrent in the

teachers' responses: 1. role as a giver of knowledge, and 2. role as facilitator, guide, and model of the language.

Role as a giver/provider of knowledge

Most teachers (11 out of 14) considered their role as givers or providers of knowledge. This role is consistent with the process-product paradigm in teacher education where the teacher is the authority, possesses the knowledge, and takes the decisions in the classroom. Here, there is a clear hierarchy where the teacher holds the power.

In addition, in this role, EFL teachers focus their teaching on the linguistic components of the language, denying the possibility of developing the students' critical language awareness of English as a tool that perpetuates social inequalities. The following quotes from the teachers' suggest their conception of teaching as transmission of knowledge.

- Give them [students] tools to be excellent teachers at any level (Ms. Machado).
- Teach, train, motivate future English teachers. Give them tools to be excellent teachers at any level (Ms. Méndez).
- Help students to communicate and give them skills/tools to teach others (Ms. Díaz).
- Help my students to acquire and learn English (Ms. Brito).

Role as facilitator, guide and model of the language.

In this role of facilitator, guide, and model, the teacher assumes that the learning process is constructed by the learners. Therefore, their role is to help them to do so. In their answers, this group of three teachers said:

- Guide students gently through their learning process (Ms. Pérez).
- Model who can be imitated for students of English . . . Also my role is of a facilitator (Ms. Machado).
- Teach students a code they can use to extend their expectations as human beings and professionals (Mr. Soto).
- Be a bridge to all the new thing a learner needs to know [in] English (Mr. Torres).
- Ser el guía del salón de clase para dirigir actividades que conduzcan al alumno a construir su conocimiento. (Be the guide in the classroom in order to conduct activities that lead students to construct their own knowledge). (Ms. Moreno).

As we argued at the beginning of this paper, the role of English teachers is an important aspect of critical pedagogy where the teachers assume a position of change and transformation, connecting their teaching with the socioeconomic and political aspects of the context where they teach. Because we wanted to find out about Venezuelan teachers perceptions regarding critical pedagogy, we asked the question, “Do you see any relationship between the teaching of EFL and critical pedagogy? Describe briefly” (Question # 8). We found that these 14 educators did not seem to associate critical pedagogy with their English teaching. In fact, 50% of teachers did not provide any answer to this question. This may be interpreted as a lack of knowledge about the term. 14 % of them answered negatively as follows. One answered, “ We don’t use critical pedagogy in teaching English. We just teach the language in its four skills”. The other said, “No really”. 28% of the respondents believe themselves to be using critical pedagogy in their teaching. However, they do not seem to interpret it in the way we have argued here. These are their answers:

- There has to be more participation and/or interaction on the students' side. Not all the work is on the teacher (Ms. Páez).
- Both are related because it is impossible to improve your teaching strategies and methodology if you don't make use of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is that constant evaluation of our pedagogical praxis where we should take into account the opinion of our colleagues, students, and ourselves (Ms. Machado).
- El profesor, en una clase de Inglés, es un guía, es decir, hace un equipo con el alumno para generar oportunidades para producir e ir construyendo la nueva lengua. (The teacher in an English class, is a guide, i.e., he conforms a team with the student to generate opportunities to construct the new language). (Ms. Moreno).
- English teachers should be trained to increase their critical awareness of what they do in a classroom. This will allow them to contrast their own behavior vis-à-vis that of other teachers in the same area or field (Mr. Soto).

The above answers suggest that for these teachers critical pedagogy is aligned with participation and democracy, usually in student-centered classrooms where CLT is the approach used to learn the language, and where students and teachers share decisions. However, as Pennycook (1999) contends “ A critical approach to TESOL is more than arranging the chairs in circle and discussing social issues. [It] must look not only at questions of power sharing in the curriculum, but also at the broader critical concerns [in each context]. (p.338).

Only one teacher seems to be close to the understanding of the relationship between critical pedagogy and EFL, but she clearly associates it with the learning of the target culture. She wrote: “ I think we should encourage our students to think about the cultural- political

context of the language, and in that way they can analyze the reasons why they are learning the language and the culture. It is not possible to learn about the language without learning about the culture. I try to emphasize the learning of the culture.”

In the answer to question # 9, “In your opinion, what is the role of English in Venezuela?” The majority of teachers (86%) thought of the role of English in Venezuela as an instrument for specific purposes. The following answers state the different purposes they see in each case.

Instrument to get better job opportunities and benefits

- People want to learn the language for job benefits they can obtain (Ms. Riera).
- Economically speaking, English brings more chances to people; they can be selected for a job if they speak or at least read or write in English (Mr. Torres).

Instrument to access information in the professional fields

- Everybody who goes into a university in any career should acquire/learn at least instrumental English due that it is the universal language and most of the information (updating info) arrives originally in English (Ms. Páez).
- There are many people who want to learn English because they need it. Engineers, doctors, computer programmers, and many more professionals spend lots of money in English courses for special purposes (Ms. Pérez).

Instrument to serve as a bridge for commercial, political, and social relationships with other countries.

- It is very important because Venezuela is a country that has commercial relations with other countries where English is spoken (Ms. Medina).
- To bridge the gap between our country and the developed countries. Participate in worldwide social, educational, technological policies oriented to help the Third World countries (Mr. Sánchez).

The rest of the teachers (14%) feel that the role of English in Venezuela is limited to another course requirement in the curriculum. One of them said: “ English in Venezuela should have a more important role in the educational field. English is taught as another subject.” Another one said: “ I don’t think the role of English in Venezuela has been clearly identified, or defined. There is, however, some sort of cultural expectation that views English as classroom English only, because of a curious gap between users’ real needs and syllabus designs.”

All of the respondents mentioned only the advantages and benefits of English from a “neutral” point of view, legitimizing in this way the taken-for-granted assumptions regarding the apolitical neutrality of ELT, and therefore, overlooking the issues of power and social inequalities that lie behind the teaching of EIL.

Pedagogical Implications

In our purpose to address critical pedagogy in the context of ELT in Venezuela we believe that our findings have several relevant implications for teacher education programs as well as for EFL teachers in general. First, as advocates of critical pedagogy, we believe that our task as teacher educators is not to pass on skills and knowledge to future teachers, but to develop their awareness about their role as agents of transformation of their own reality. We believe that to address issues of race, identity, language, inequality, and power in ELT education programs is

crucial in order to empower NNESTs. Empowerment or concientization (Freire, 1970) in critical pedagogy aims at developing the individual's "critical awareness" of the political and social structures that surround her or him, and the role that as an agent of transformation she or he can play. In a seminar for NNESTs, Brutt-Griffler & Samimy (1999) used EFL teachers' reflection through discussion and diary writing in order to empower teachers through critical praxis generated from within. Thus, engaging future teachers in an ongoing process of self-reflection and "a construction of a subjectivity" (Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 1999, 418) in their struggle for finding who they are and where they come from is empowerment. By doing so, teacher education programs will foster NNESTs' critical thinking and self-reflection so that they will be able to challenge pervasive assumptions such as "Standard English", accent, and the superiority of native speakers over nonnative speakers. There is a need to debunk the NS-NNS dichotomy on the grounds of emerging concepts such as multicompetent speakers (Cook, 1999) and language expertise (Rampton, 1995). There is also a need to educate NNESTs in the light of the multiculturalism represented by "World Englishes" (Kachru, 1984). Thus, a move to critical pedagogy in ELT entails going beyond the dimension of linguistic competence to a broader socio-political reality that examines the relationship between language, discourses, and power (Fairclough, 1989; Pennycook, 1994). By doing so, NNESTs will uncover the wrong assumptions behind the "apolitical neutrality" of English. As Warschauver (2000) suggests EFL teachers' agency is crucial in using English as a means for themselves as well as for their students in order to "express their identity and make their voices heard" (p.530).

The Need to Develop our Own Textbooks Materials

Another significant change that has to arise from a critical pedagogy point of view, is that in language teaching and learning, and particularly in the field of EFL, we can no longer

continue to consider language materials and textbooks produced in the center, that is, the U.S, Britain, Australia, Canada, etc. to be the perfect and unique models to follow. We need to understand that this is a profitable business that implies an array of elements mainly beneficial to the countries mentioned above. But, are these materials the most appropriate in our contexts? Certainly most of these materials have been developed under the light of well-grounded research studies, but not necessarily, and even rarely, based on the reality of our developing countries. It is about time for us to step aside the unquestioning attitude, and begin to produce our own materials. Who else but us, may know better what interest our students, stimulate their learning, and open their minds to understanding their world and that of others? We need not to reject on an absolute basis language materials and textbooks from other latitudes just because they are foreign, but we certainly have to be able to examine them from a more critical stand.

The need to conduct Action Research

Clearly connected to the need of creating and adapting language materials and textbooks to our context, there is an urgent necessity to understand that we cannot longer postpone our role as researchers. As EFL teachers, and more specifically as language teacher educators, we have to acknowledge the fact that it is from our practice that we can generate theories, methods and approaches that fit our social realities. Research and practice must be an integral part of our teaching in order to promote relevant and cultural appropriate change in our contexts. As Freeman (2000) says, “What counts as knowledge to one group may or may not be what counts as knowledge to another” (p.1). He goes on to point out:

In their daily work, teachers are encouraged to use other people’s ideas as ready-mades. The assumption is that ideas can be imported and still be the same ideas . . . Choosing ready-made ideas (or importing theories) takes the place of creating one’s own tools or

local understandings . . . but how well do they work in the day-to-day snow storms of teaching?” (p.5).

Freeman’ words certainly refer to the passive role of teachers as consumers of theories and materials generated from outside, particularly from the Center. The fact that action research in their classroom is not a common practice in ELT in Venezuela, contributes to maintain this hegemony. Generally, EFL teachers do not create or innovate in their teaching, rather they tend to be passive recipients of imported ideas. We need to inform our language teaching and learning from within. Through collaborative action research projects that involve our students, we will also be empowering NNESTs through pedagogy and research (Wong, Yuh-Yun, Baugou & Chacon , 2000).

As we said before, imported theories and subsequent methods and approaches to ELT should not be adopted blindly in our EFL contexts. Most of the above are derived from very different realities. Kachru (as quoted in Pennycook, 1994, 167) raises a strong critique against the “evangelical zeal” used by the center to export their methods and theories to the developing countries “often with weak theoretical foundations, and with doubtful relevance to the sociological, educational, and economic context of the Outer Circle.”

EFL classrooms in developing countries are mainly characterized by a limited access to technology, large classes, teachers with maximum teaching loads (with low-paid salaries) seeking to improve their salaries, and scarce opportunities for both teachers and students to practice the target language. This very same reality is the one we need to critically address in order to decide upon our practice. In the same way, we need to create the necessary awareness among government officials, administrators, educators, and students to find ways to cope with our limitations, and therefore, change what we want to change, and keep what we want to keep.

The Need to Encourage Life-Long Learning

It is not possible to imagine any concept of efficient education without referring to the understanding that learning is a life-long process, where the ultimate goal is the continuous search for knowledge. Needless to say that as language teacher educators identified with the principles of critical pedagogy, we have to encourage and develop in our students a sense of constant improvement and self-reflection about their language competence to be used as a tool for transformation and construction of their identities.

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Appendix A

Dear Colleague:

Please respond as honestly as possible to the following questionnaire. Thank you so much for your cooperation.

1. Educational level

Bachelor, specify major _____

M. A. Yes _____ No _____ Specify major _____

Ph. D. Yes _____ No _____ Specify major _____

2. Have you studied in an English speaking country ?

Yes _____ No _____ Specify _____

3. How long have you been teaching English? Specify years _____

4. How would you rate your proficiency in English?

Low _____ Intermediate _____ Advanced _____ Near Native _____

5. According to your opinion, what is your role as an English teacher? Describe briefly.

6. Do you see any relationship between the teaching of English as a foreign language and Critical Pedagogy? Describe briefly.

7. In your opinion, what is the role of English in Venezuela?



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