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Research in Critical Pedagogy: Implications for English Language Classrooms in Asia

Paolo Nino Valdez

De La Salle University, Manila 1004, Philippines

Email: paolo.valdez@dlsu.edu.ph

Abstract

Recent scholarship in English language teaching has identified two important directions in developing socio-politically responsive education; namely, Post Method Pedagogy and Situated Literacies. In this meta-analytic work, I describe the prominent issues involved in research concerning critical pedagogy in English language teaching research. Specifically, this paper initially examines the theoretical and methodological approaches employed in investigations in the area, and proceeds with identifying established trends and potential issues concerning the applications of critical pedagogy in varied multilingual, multicultural contexts in Asia. Analysis of different investigations in the region suggests that, while critical pedagogy may be responsive to different needs (learner, socio-political, cultural), it also focuses on varying productive spaces of engagement, incorporation of multiliteracies and transformational practices.

Keywords: Critical Pedagogy; English Language Teaching in Asia; Post-method Pedagogy

Introduction

In recent years, scholarship in English language teaching has acknowledged the growing socio-political character of the profession. That is, while most research done in the area attribute differences in the teaching-learning situation to globalization, multilingualism/culturalism, and other social forces, critical pedagogy remains an important theoretical and practical contribution in the continuous discussion in the field's development (Lopez-Gopar, 2019; Benesch, 1996). Critical pedagogy is an approach that sees educators as instrumental actors in addressing social issues in the community (Freire, 2005; Auerbach, 1991; Kincheloe, 2008; McLaren, 2015; Giroux, 2004). Moreover, since schools are sites that reproduce inequality, critical pedagogy is important in challenging different forms of marginalization. Departing from positivistic approaches such as communicative language teaching, critical pedagogy encourages engagement through dialogue (Bahktin, 1981). That is, since education should not be treated as a one-way process, educators are encouraged to work with learners to create conditions that are suitable for meaningful discourses about relevant societal issues.

Second, critical pedagogy opens opportunities for questioning assumptions about commonsensical beliefs, which stem from dominant ideologies in society (Giroux & Giroux, 2006; Foucault, 1977; Benesch, 1996). Specifically, since schools are instrumental in propagating standards of achievement and favorable behavior, critical pedagogy is responsible in unraveling problematic beliefs and practices which may lead to marginalization (Auerbach, 1991; Canagarajah, 1996). Third, as an educational approach, critical pedagogy extends the participation of schools into social action – one that prompts educators and learners to work with communities in transformative projects that will result in challenging different forms of oppression in society (Kumaradivelu, 2003).

As a region that is diverse in terms of language, culture, and social practices, Asia poses as an interesting site where critical pedagogy is applied in a wide range of educational

contexts. Specifically, due to the different religions, cultural belief systems, and socio-economic conditions of countries in the region, studying the applications of critical pedagogy in this context can spark constructive debates in addressing the challenges brought about by diversity. As outlined by several scholars, the Asian region is of interest among scholars for several reasons. First, Asia has the largest number of speakers of English as it has “already surpassed that of native speakers, if we count the number of people who use English as a second and foreign language” (Cheng, 2012, p. 327). This means that while multilingualism is a norm in the region, the English language plays a significant role in local and international affairs (Kirkpatrick & Sussex, 2012). Moreover, Widodo, Wood and Gupta (2017) note that since countries that belong to the Asian region hold key roles in economic, socio-political, and cultural developments in the world, educational developments in Asia should focus on allowing teachers to recontextualize their practices to address learners’ needs. While the learning of English in the region has resulted in great investments in material resources, teacher training, and curriculum reform, recontextualizing the teaching of English in Asia entails the view that “classrooms serve not only as a site of engagement where a teacher and students interact with one another but also as social events, which involve social roles (e.g., teachers as facilitators, students as teacher co-collaborators), social relationships (e.g., a teacher and students, students and their peers), and social interaction (e.g., a teacher and students, students and their peers, students and instructional text). These social roles, social relationships, and social interaction shape the diversity and complexity of classrooms” (p.3).

Moreover, since the new challenge of critical pedagogy is aimed at addressing the inequalities brought about by globalization, the role of English language teaching in Asia is greatly felt due to the region’s rise as a center of production and labor. For instance, the emergence of the business process outsourcing industry, as well as the transfer of production facilities of global brands to Asia, shows the shift in the political

economy of production which reorganizes the unequal distribution of resources from powerful to less privileged states (Tupas, 2008; Cameron, 2012; Kirkpatrick & Sussex, 2012) .

While critical pedagogy is applicable in different disciplines, there has been a growing body of scholarly work in critical pedagogy in English language teaching due to several reasons. First, Pennycook (2014) believes that much of the discussions on theory and practice in ELT denies the historical and political nature of the profession. Specifically, it is believed that methodologies that have been espoused by western and developed countries do not only promote dominant ideologies about English language learning and teaching, but also preserve the socio-political and economic agendas of these more powerful nation states (Phillipson, 1991).

Kumaradivelu (1994) looks beyond positivistic views of ELT methodology by acknowledging the inherent nuances brought about by diversity in cultures. By introducing the term *post-method approach* to language teaching, he believes that principles such as practicality, particularity, and possibility are aligned with the central tenets of critical pedagogy cited earlier. Given these points, this article examines the issues concerning the application of critical pedagogy in the Asian context. More specifically, I argue that critical pedagogy, as seen in investigations situated in ELT classrooms in Asia, is not only responsive to learner needs but also focuses on varying productive spaces of engagement, incorporation of multiliteracies, and transformational practices.

Critical Pedagogy and Scholarship in English Language Teaching

Though a rich positivistic tradition has dominated research in English language teaching, several scholars have challenged the supposedly value-free tenets of education. Pennycook's (1989) article that critically examines the history of language teaching approaches, the promotion of the use of different methods has been motivated by political and economic means. This can be seen in the use of scientific approaches in teaching and materials,

which regulated the consumption of knowledge in the field. In the context of critical pedagogy, Freire (2005) asserts that education without a critical edge simply reproduces inequality as it only equips learners to provide answers to things that are imparted to them by teachers (Freire calls this Banking Concept of Learners). For him, critical pedagogy entails raising questions and engaging people in constructive dialogue, which all lead to transformative practices that challenge the status quo.

Other scholars such as McLaren (2015) and Giroux (2004) have also cited the importance of critical pedagogy in classrooms as globalization's powerful grip on communities can create unequal relations between people. For instance, the relevance of today's political issues that divide countries are borne out of differences in terms of class, culture, race, and other sociocultural characteristics.

In the context of English language teaching, it is interesting that many scholars have contributed to the growth of critical pedagogy in the discipline. Noteworthy are the studies of Canagarajah (1993) that examine the everyday practices of resistance of linguistic imperialism in English language classrooms in Sri Lanka. Employing critical ethnography, he traces the role of the English language among teachers and learners, and the political and economic consequences it has brought to Sri Lanka. Interestingly, Canagarajah's work also reveals the dilemmas of teachers as they come to grips with the global influence of English and problems it poses in the local context. Pennycook's (2014) work on the cultural politics of English as an international language also provides key points for discussion among teachers intending to adopt a critical edge in their pedagogy. For instance, the integration of critical pragmatism in teaching English for Academic Purposes allows teachers to view culture as a resource for students in creative construction in language learning. Moreover, critical pedagogy recognizes the need for educators to develop a more fluid understanding of language learning. That is, while educational models are often patterned over dominant theories emanating

from the center countries, language learning from Pennycook's view should be seen as a site of struggle, resistance, and compromise.

The researches mentioned are known to be key studies in understanding the application of critical pedagogies in the ELT classroom. That is, they demonstrate the potential of collaboration and innovations on the part of teachers, and acknowledge linguistic, social, and political realities within the local context. Scholars are challenged to explore (1) the potentials of critical pedagogy in ELT in local classrooms as an approach, which creates productive spaces for engagement, (2) the incorporation of multiliteracies, as well as (3) the pursuance of transformative practices. The succeeding sections elaborate on these three points.

Critical Pedagogy and Productive Spaces of Engagement

Acknowledging the political character of education has led to the creation of productive spaces of engagement to deal with a variety of issues related to language and differences. Specifically, Barry (2011) examined the role of English in Brunei as a language that appears to serve a multitude of purposes, but has varying acceptance among locals. Given the culturally diverse and highly stratified social relations in the Brunei community, Barry suggests that educators and learners need to work together to develop critical skills in English that go beyond appreciating the material and symbolic advantages of learning the language. Rivers (2011) used conversation diaries with Japanese learners of English and found that, while self-directed strategies of using the L1 is helpful in developing autonomous learners, the activity opens opportunities for teachers to address linguistic exclusion in English language classes, which are often enacted through language policies and practices in schools. With regard to gender, Appleby's (2009) examination of EAP classroom practices among Australian teachers in East Timor shows the apparent complex contributions of gender in language learning as role conventions appear to clash with cultural beliefs of the community. Investigations that open spaces for engagement suggest the need

for opportunities to examine socio-cultural relations and language learning. These studies suggest that while teachers are aware of their critical role in shaping learners' perspectives in the teaching learning process, they also acknowledge the real world problems that may impact their students' learning. For instance, societal problems such as discrimination, war, political conflict, and so on spark teachers' drive to engage their learners in more meaningful ways that go beyond the learning of language for communication. Using critical pedagogy as a platform for transformative expression, teachers and learners find ways in challenging problematic but oftentimes commonsensical views about the world.

Critical Pedagogy and Multiliteracies

Since critical pedagogy is an inclusive approach, salient principles of multiliteracies can be observed and take a critical orientation (New London Group, 1996; Frechette, 2013). As Sussex & Kirkpatrick (2012) emphasize:

Students acquire literacy and numeracy, and now “multi-literacies” in terms of different capacities to manipulate and work with different cognitive skillsets. English as a background competence will share some of these properties. It will continue to be a subject in the curriculum, one to be assessed like all the others. But it will also be one which, like literacy and numeracy, provides cognitive capacity to address other tasks. (p.226)

In addition, the investigations examined show that the incorporation of multiliteracies entails the use of different modes such as images, videos, and music in creating outputs in response to relevant local and global social issues. Moreover, communication technologies have allowed teachers and learners to widen the audience for communicating relevant sociopolitical issues for more productive dialogues. For instance, Lin's (2008) work on the integration of popular culture in English language classes in Hong Kong is also noteworthy as it allows teachers to

promote learner participation in creative and unique ways in expressing their views about learning English and its consequences in their future careers. Recognizing the power of hybrid practices, Lin's work shows the potential of using pop culture in the context of critical pedagogy. The use of hip hop, as identified in her work, not only shows the different ways language is deployed for creative expression, but also deeper societal issues such as school, parental, and peer pressure that are relevant in students' lives. Given the proliferation of different texts that students encounter in social media, students in ESL classes in the Philippines were made to create memes in response to socio-political issues as a means of sensitizing them to the potential audience, language, and multimodal resources needed to express meaning effectively (Valdez, Navera & Garinto, 2019).

Due to the emergence of technology and different modalities in communication, advocates of critical pedagogy have capitalized on its merits through the development of various innovative projects in the ELT classroom. Kuo's (2009) work on examining the potentials of picture books to communicate social issues among Taiwanese EFL students yields insights on the use of personal and cultural resources that lead to critical responses in addressing discrimination. Another project described by Kuo (2013) uses self-discovery texts to help learners develop self-awareness while questioning essentialist interpretations of their role in society. In the Philippines, poster essays were used to elicit critical responses from students on the complex relationship between labor migration and gendered discourses (Valdez, 2012). Mambu's (2011) work traces the influence of critical pedagogy in Indonesian EFL classrooms and asserts that educators have used the approach in developing advocacies through news editorials and literary appreciation pieces that counter dominant voices in society. As observed, the use of multiliteracies in the context of critical pedagogy allows learners to practice agency through projects that capitalize on their cultural resources and draw upon personal experiences to engage meaningful dialogues. Such practices acknowledge the powerful role of semiotic resources in

mediating and challenging problematic beliefs in society (Tan & Guo, 2014).

Critical Pedagogy and Transformative Practices

In the context of English language education, developing critical awareness and drawing on cultural and personal resources among learners lead to positive action in addressing important relevant political issues (Morgan, 2009). To illustrate, Wharton (2011) incorporated cultural studies and critical text analysis in a class with Chinese learners. Students were asked to examine aspects of bureaucratic texts to investigate their representative and interactive features. Using principles of critical discourse analysis, learners were led to examine the negotiation and contestation of power relations as articulated in the texts. As a result, learners become better equipped with skills needed to critique problematic assumptions in everyday texts, which may overtly or subversively suppress equal rights. Interestingly, Wharton's work is also important as it encourages the use of critical pedagogy among learners who are privileged, so may be a powerful transformative tool. Specifically, access to material resources, availability of favorable conditions in the acquisition of language skills and an expansive network can be readily available to privileged students. As such, this can help sensitize them to be more inclusive in addressing problems of different sectors in society.

Shin and Crookes (2005) used critical dialogue among Korean high school students taking an EFL course to examine the dynamics of race and culture in society. Through varied interactive tasks, it was found that ideologies such as passivity of southeast Asian students and rigid hierarchies appear to create stereotypes in society which merit interrogation. Barnawi and Ha (2015) used a case study approach in investigating the appropriation of practices among Saudi teachers who have trained abroad. As seen in their work, while the teachers acknowledge the importance of established theories and practices in more progressive settings, they develop a level of criticality that compels

them to situate their practices in relation to existing conditions in their home settings.

While critical pedagogy as applied in English language classrooms in Asia shows differences in focus, there are common thematic trends which can be helpful for researchers and educators. For example, critical pedagogy recognizes diversity as a resource and not as a problem. That is, while educators recognize the different perspectives and practices that students bring to the classroom, the application of critical pedagogy allows teachers and learners to collaborate and find new avenues for creative expression. Greatly motivated through dialogue, the critically oriented English language classroom values differences in ideas. Second, critical pedagogy capitalizes on the power of technology. As a tool to bridge the gap between distances and time, students and teachers go beyond the four walls of the classroom as technology provides a versatile platform to discuss ideas, confirm assumptions, and maximize opportunities for engagement. Moreover, the vast resources of the internet provide for the enrichment of lessons. For the critically oriented classroom, technology realizes the notion that language is but a part of a semiotic process (Blommaert, 2010). That is, enhancing the message for creative projects can be done in different modes such as pictures, colors, sounds, and other multimodal resources. More importantly, critical pedagogy in the context of the ELT classroom in Asia remains responsive to social issues. Given differences in power relations between nations and cultures, critical pedagogy as applied in the ELT classroom provides a fertile ground for constructive debate concerning issues that matter to teachers and students.

Future Directions

ELT classrooms are oftentimes confronted with interesting challenges brought about by diversity. That is, differences due to multilingualism/multiculturalism, globalization/localization, sociocultural/sociopolitical issues may pose problems for teachers and learners as they come to grips with the reality of how the

English language mediates worldly realities. As seen by the examples and literature reported in this paper, critical pedagogy creates opportunities for transformation and idealistic change. Specifically, critical pedagogy opens spaces for engagement, capitalizes on multiliteracies to maximize avenues for productive dialogue, and initiates transformative projects. Language is a vehicle for critical thinking and this pedagogical approach highlights the importance of learner agency. Discourses can be analyzed and examined, thereby helping in the production of counter-discourses. Though one caveat in this approach is the significant differences in levels of competencies and even functions of the English language in communities, one important component of critical pedagogy is the power of collaboration. As an approach that recognizes the power of collaboration educators are encouraged to engage in meaningful dialogue with students, parents, administrators, and even government officials in thinking of ways to improve the learning conditions of schools. One example is viewing multilingualism as a resource that can help negotiate meaning among stakeholders. Also, harnessing the potential benefits of social media in creating tasks that can improve skills in language use in real life situations and at the same time allow learners to engage in relevant issues in the communities where they belong.

While there are varying methods of implementing critical pedagogy in Asian classrooms, developing critical awareness among learners sensitizes their notions of agency. Since language teaching is viewed as an effective means in learning aspects of culture, critical pedagogy in the context of ELT recognizes the rich experiences brought in by learners to maximize learning opportunities for engagement. This means that since learning is an active process of reconfiguring knowledge as influenced by varying experiences, understanding cultures can lead to wider acceptance and better appreciation of diversity. Recognizing that we are all global citizens, students are encouraged to question, respond, and act on relevant social issues in their communities. Teachers and learners are expected to draw on relevant personal

and socio-cultural resources to create counter-discourses and to challenge dominant beliefs that may marginalize members of a society. Given these points, educators that embrace critical pedagogy in the Asian context can pursue projects appropriate to the changing global and local landscape. For instance, the notion of a post-factual era in politics has resulted in different threats that may endanger efforts in creating safe spaces for interaction (Valdez, Navera & Garinto, 2019; Alverman, 2017). To conclude, critical pedagogy is instrumental in promoting agency and counter-discourses, which are essential in creating conditions of possibility.

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The Author

Paolo Nino Valdez is an Associate Professor and research fellow of the Department of English and Applied Linguistics, De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines. His publications have appeared in *Discourse, Context and Media*, *Asia Pacific Education Researcher*, *Journal of AsiaTEFL*, *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction*, and *Reflective practice*. His research interests are in the areas of linguistic landscapes, teacher beliefs, critical pedagogy and contemporary sociolinguistics.

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