Critical Pedagogy
in the Spanish Language Classroom:
A Liberatory Process

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The schools have often been defined as systems in which the culture and values of the dominant classes are reproduced, hence maintaining the hierarchical structures of power relations in society. The dominant culture and values are reproduced through the transmission of *habitus,* or the inculcation of particular dispositions in students, teachers, administrators, and politicians, that generates specific practices (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1998). Students and instructors together acquire similar *habitus* in which a particular social order reflecting the interests of the dominant classes is systematically reproduced through their activities within the system. This *habitus* often legitimizes a stratified division of power, which privileges the dominant class to the exclusion of the *other*:

> Whatever that *other* might be: someone of a different gender, race, class, national origin; somebody at a greater or lesser distance from the norm; someone outside the set; someone who doesn't fit into the mental configurations that give our lives order and meaning. (Madrid, 1994, p. 130)

Within the educational system in the United States (U.S.), many scholars have analyzed the foreign language classroom as a site that contributes to this type of *othering*, and have voiced the necessity of organizing the language curriculum in new ways to address culture (Kramsch, 1993; Omaggio, 1993; Seelye, 1993; Schwartz & Kavanaugh, 1997). However, to examine this issue, the concept of culture has to be analyzed.

Wallerstein's (1990) description of the uses of the concept of culture was not conceptualized to analyze culture in the foreign language classroom, but his analysis proves useful for examining how culture becomes framed within the traditional language classroom. According to his critique of the use of the term culture, the culture presented in the language classroom is a mixture of *Culture Usage I* and *Culture Usage II*. Wallerstein defines *Culture Usage I* as having

characteristics shared by members of a group that differentiate them from other groups. For instance, Spanish, being the language shared by Latinos, which differentiates them from the non-Latinos, would fall into the category of *Culture Usage I.* Wallerstein's *Culture Usage II* refers to the characteristics that differentiate members within the same group, or that define hierarchies within the groups. Enforcing the accent used in Castile, Spain, in detriment of other Latin American accents is an example of focusing on *Culture Usage II* in the U.S. Spanish classroom. Wallerstein (1990) explains *Culture Usage II* as "an ideological cover to justify the interests of some persons (obviously the upper strata) within any given *group* or *social system* against the interests of other persons within this same group" (p. 34).

What is often lacking in the Spanish classroom is the critical examination of *culture as difference* (Culture Usage I) and *culture as hierarchy* (Culture Usage II). This analysis would help students question the *othering* that is reproduced frequently in what could be called the *school habitus* as a first step in understanding that the uncritical approach to culture in the foreign language classroom contributes to *othering* of the target cultures. In the educational system this approach follows in the tradition of critical pedagogy.

One of the objectives of employing a critical pedagogical approach in the Spanish language classroom is to develop cultural awareness and to help learners become cross-culturally competent in a society where Spanish speakers is the fastest growing minority group (Walsh, 1996). Critical pedagogy helps to examine the teacher and students' perceptions of language study and the development of cultural awareness and of critical thinking skills. Using strategies characteristic of critical pedagogy, students actively participate in the development of the curriculum, keep and share journals with their peers, study the grammatical structures of Spanish in the context of cross-cultural activities, and interact with members of the Latino community developing mini-ethnographic studies.

Although critical pedagogy has been adopted in schools throughout the last century, its application has usually been isolated to limited geographical settings (Wolk, 1998). Generally, it has been applied in classrooms composed of minorities as a tool to empower students to participate as decision-makers in societies where the culture and values of the dominant classes are legitimized to the detriment of their own cultures. The significance of applying critical pedagogy in a Spanish language classroom is not only to empower the participants directly, but also to empower indirectly the members of the cultures being studied in the classroom by giving them a face to which students can relate. Therefore, applying critical pedagogy in a Spanish classroom has the potential to contribute not only to the literature on critical pedagogy in the foreign language classroom, but also to raise cross-cultural awareness among college students.

Critical Pedagogy

While critical pedagogy has several roots, it is most strongly associated with Paulo Freire, who during the 1960s conducted a national literacy campaign in Brazil that promoted knowledge through the critical examination of existing social conditions (Freire, 1970). He drew from Catholic liberation theology that broke from the definition of Church authority, encouraging teachers and students to engage in dialogues over texts that were meaningful to their lives (Bennett deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999, p. 30). However, as Wink (2000) illustrates, Freire is only one of the theorists that have helped to conceptualize this pedagogy. As illustrated in Figure 1, Wink also traces the roots of critical pedagogy to European and North American philosophical traditions. She traces the European influence to Marx, the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, and Gramsci. Analyzing the educational system, Marx denounced education as an insidious vehicle for institutionalizing elite values and for indoctrinating people into unconsciously maintaining these values. The Frankfurt School shared the belief with Marxism that institutions such as schools reproduced injustice and oppression in order to maintain the existing social order, but criticized
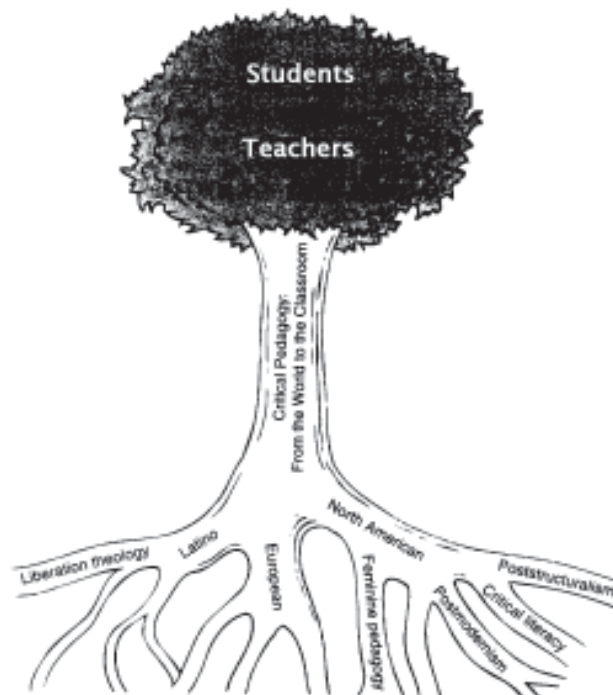

Figure 1: Critical Roots (Wink, 2000, p. 76)

Marxism for ignoring the influence of culture in the perpetuation of social inequality. Finally, Gramsci developed the notion of individuals being active agents, rather than passive victims of oppressive conditions, capable of transforming their reality (Bennett deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999).

As depicted in Figure 1, in the North American context, critical pedagogy has been applied in the educational setting over the last thirty years through different theoretical paradigms: *postmodernism*, *poststructuralism* and *feminist discourses*. These discourses are concerned with the subtle and indirect ways power works in educational institutions to oppress and marginalize certain individuals while privileging others. In the educational context, *postmodernism* asserts that by controlling access to knowledge, the dominant class also has managed to control the standards by which knowledge is judged valuable and legitimate. Thus, this standard becomes the "unmarked" form of knowledge — the form that in the collective unconsciousness of society is perceived as the norm (Tannen, 2000, p. 256). Therefore, "markedness and unmarkedness are relative categories. Who is marked and who not is ultimately a matter of context," and context is determined by the values of the dominant classes (Hill, 1997, p. 188).

Similarly, Foucault and other *poststructuralists* analyze the relation of language to power in social organizations such as schools. Foucault explains, "…any system of education is a political way of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourses, along with the knowledges and powers which they carry" (Fairclough, 1989, p. 65). Finally, *feminist theories*, defined as a range of political and theoretical feminist positions, focus on equal rights and opportunities for women in the educational system, challenging existing power relations erected by differences based on gender, class, race and sexual orientation (Bennett deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999). Feminist theorists condemn traditional school practices, which have equated female academic success with complacent and passive behaviors. Gilligan (1993) illustrates this practice when describing a 14-year-old student's resistance to accept the school's definition of what a perfect female student should be. Gilligan explains, "[Rosie] is troubled at school for her outspokenness, her irreverence, and her refusal, despite her evident brightness, to be the perfect student" (Gilligan, 1993, p. 159).

In recent decades, educational reform has often been controversial in the political arena, as exemplified by the debates around Reagan-era reports like *A Nation at Risk* and government-funded task forces like Bush Senior's "America 2000" (Walsh, 1996, p. xii). As a consequence of the political debates, educational reforms have been conducted in practically every school in the nation. However, these reforms have frequently reflected weak attempts to superficially alter the curriculum to keep up with the demands set by liberatory social movements (such as civil rights and feminist movements), but they have not resulted in significant alterations of the system (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Giroux, 1992; hooks, 1994; Walsh, 1996). Hence, critical pedagogues claim that the educational system is in

need of a major reform based on constructive criticism, dialogue, and collective struggle; that is, a reform that rises from the bottom-up (driven by the interests of teachers and students) rather than the top-down (enforced by administrators and politicians). As Giroux argues:

> At stake here is developing a notion of pedagogy capable of contesting dominant forms of symbolic production. […] This results in the production of meaning, which informs cultural workers, teachers, and students in regard to their individual and collective futures. (Giroux, 1992, p. 3)

One of the goals of critical pedagogy is to create engaged, active, critically thinking citizens, that is to say, political subjects who can participate as decision-makers in the organization of their socio-cultural realities (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1992). Critical pedagogy encourages the examination of the system of education predicated upon a redefinition of the relationship between theory and practice. Critical pedagogy challenges teachers and students to rethink the purpose and meaning of schooling, and the role that they might play as cultural workers. Critical analysts assert that critical pedagogy is an invitation to engage in social criticism, to create a discourse where the principles of human dignity, liberty, and social justice are extended.

In these ways, critical pedagogues perceive schools as cultural sites that often legitimize certain forms of knowledge and negate others, with the unintended consequence of denying the basic principle of democracy, diversity, and the politics of difference (Giroux, 1992). *Voice* is an important precept on which critical pedagogy rests (Freire, 1970, Giroux, 1992, hooks, 1994). hooks defines *voice* as a means of valuing every individual's contribution in a dialectical exchange of ideas. Students and teachers already have a *voice*, but it is a matter of whether or not the context allows for their expression. As she puts it:

> To engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences. (hooks, 1994, p. 130)

She differentiates between critical pedagogy (and what she calls education as a practice of freedom) and education that merely strives to reinforce unequal relations of power, encouraging teachers to believe they have nothing to learn from their students. Critical pedagogy also deconstructs the idea that education is a unilateral relationship between a teacher and her students. Critical pedagogy encourages teachers to be as active as they expect their students to be. Therefore, education is redefined as a multilateral relationship where teachers learn as much from their students as students learn from the teacher and each other:

> We can learn a great deal from the very students we teach. For this to happen, it is necessary that we transcend the monotonous, arrogant, and elitist traditionalism

where the teacher knows all and the student does not know anything. (Freire, 1985, p. 177)

This is not to say that teachers and students participate at an equal level. Freire (1985) identifies the difference of generations that often separates teacher and students, while hooks (1994) focuses on the power differences created by the professional hierarchy. However, hooks explains that the challenge resides in using power in a constructive positive manner, and not to perpetuate class elitism and other forms of domination. Freire (1985) encourages teachers to reinvent the role of power, not simply take it. Therefore, critical pedagogy places authority on students, empowering them to become active, responsible participants of their learning, not passive consumers.

Placing authority on the students empowers them to analyze, criticize, and question not only the material they are studying, but also the texts in which the material is presented. Although Freire's (1970) early work analyzes the implications of critical pedagogy on adult literacy (implications that are significantly different than those of traditional college teaching), his conclusions illustrate the pedagogical importance of inviting students to create their own texts and use them as the course materials. Allowing students to learn from their own texts guarantees the relevance of the material being studied to the learner's reality, and warrants an accurate level and pace for the learning process. It is not probable that students would find these texts too high or low in relation to their level of proficiency, and they can relate to their content because they have created them. Freire asserts that the act of learning involves a dialectical movement that shifts from action to reflection and vice versa. Creating texts allows students to reflect on their work and progress in an active manner. Critical pedagogy encourages teachers to help students to create texts (for instance, in journals, and ethnographies) and to reflect upon them in personal and collective dialogues.

Conclusions

The second language literature review suggests that the current challenge in the Spanish language classroom is to identify techniques to enhance not only students' language proficiency but also their cultural awareness. One way to achieve this is by applying a critical pedagogical approach to the language classroom. Critical pedagogy is an invitation to redefine the roles of the teacher and students, building a classroom community in which education is approached as a multilateral relationship where teachers learn as much from their students as students learn from the teacher and each other. Furthermore, in the critical classroom, participants question the course content, and create alternative materials in order to approach the target cultures in alternative ways.

The educational system has often been defined as a system in which specific

cultural values are reproduced through the transmission of *habitus,* which often functions to legitimize the interests of the dominant classes. Critical pedagogy encourages the questioning of this *habitus* to empower students and teachers to question conventional ways of perceiving the world in order to enhance their learning. Through the application of critical pedagogy, the Spanish language classroom has the potential of becoming a space in which students not only attain language proficiency, but also become cross-culturally competent, a growing imperative in a country where the Latino community is already the largest minority group in many states.

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