



LOCAL AND FOREIGN CULTURES, A GREAT INTEGRATION TO BRING CRITICAL PEDAGOGY PRAXIS INTO THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

This article is a theoretical discussion about how local and foreign cultures take part in a critical learning process. At the beginning I show a theoretical review of critical pedagogy history. After, I present a revision of some research studies to see the different fields of critical pedagogy application. Then, I provide some ideas about how local and foreign cultures facilitate the English learning and social consciousness development. At the end, I present a discussion about materials implications and characteristics inside the framework of the critical pedagogy praxis

Key words: Critical pedagogy, local culture, foreign culture, learning process, teaching materials, students, teachers.

Resumen

Este artículo es una discusión teórica acerca de cómo la cultura local y extranjera toma parte en un aprendizaje crítico. Al comienzo doy a conocer una revisión teórica acerca de la historia de la filosofía crítica; luego presento la revisión de algunos estudios para ver los diferentes campos de aplicación de la pedagogía crítica. En seguida, presento algunas ideas acerca de cómo la cultura local y extranjera facilitan el aprendizaje del inglés y el desarrollo de la conciencia social. Al final discuto algunas implicaciones y características de los materiales dentro del marco de la pedagogía crítica.

Palabras clave: Pedagogía crítica, cultura local, cultura extranjera, proceso de aprendizaje, materiales, estudiantes, profesores.

Introduction

If we as teachers ask ourselves how meaningful our teaching practices are? Many of us surely will have to modify those pedagogical practices. Nowadays we may find teachers who strictly follow a textbook or imitate other teachers' teaching activities, but not reflect and evaluate if those teaching practices are the most appropriate to educate active citizens; students act as passive receptors of information, consequently they do not examine if these practices are relevant and significant to their personal development. Some teaching – learning activities have become routine and vain practices which are not based on a careful reflection upon students' needs and characteristics. These are not directed to develop personal and social awareness. It implies that human beings' practices, activities and learning processes are really relevant and useful for them if these are related to their life experiences and contribute to encourage the individual and social realization. Hence, this article is a theoretical discussion that purports to show that in a foreign language learning teaching process, students' local culture and the culture where the foreign language emerges are powerful sources to transform teaching in a critical learning teaching process (critical pedagogy) to be useful and meaningful for learners. In this theoretical discussion, critical pedagogy is understood as the different teaching and learning practices that are directed to enable students' voices in such a way that learners can generate social changes to annihilate oppression and achieve a democratic society.

Critical Pedagogy Background

According to Stephen (2005) critical pedagogy is a teaching approach that was developed between 1960 and 1970. Marxists inspired this teaching approach. Marx claimed that individuals must receive according to their needs and contribute according to their abilities. During interwar years, a group of German and American theorists (Frankfurt School), who were influenced by Marx ideas, argued that schools encourage dependency and a hierarchical understanding of authority and provide a distorted view of history. John Dewey was an early critical philosopher who believed that an ideal classroom should be a place where students use trial and error to develop needed skills to a democratic citizenship (Palmer and Emmons, 2004). In 1970 Paulo Freire who is considered the inaugural philosopher of critical pedagogy stated that people needed to engage in a praxis that incorporates theory, action, and reflection as means to work toward social change and justice. Henry Giroux (1981) began to formulate a critical pedagogy that synthesized the more progressive elements of John Dewey's philosophy and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. Giroux, Roger, Michael Apple, and Peter McLaren focused their efforts on examining and better understanding the role that schools play in transmitting certain messages about political, social, and economic life believing that a revolutionary critical pedagogy will allow educators to realize the possibilities of democratic social values within their classroom (Kincheloe, 2004).

Shrewsbury (1987), Patti Lather (1991), Hooks (1994), and Weiler (2001) and other feminist pedagogues, argue that education should challenge the structure of the traditional canon and develop and offer alternative classroom practices (Breuning, 2006). Feminist pedagogy “emphasizes the importance of increasing consciousness about the existence of oppressive social structure and the need to change it, and the possibility of social transformation” (Weiler, 2001, p. 68). Shor (1996) became fascinated with the work of Freire and worked to integrate notions of social critique with classroom techniques of pedagogy in ways that create new educational possibilities (Kincheloe, 2004). Shor integrates instruction about the theory of critical pedagogy with a classroom praxis that emphasizes the potential for teachers and students to act as agents of social change (Breuning, 2006).

The previous literature review allows to see that critical pedagogy emerged as a consequence of a rigorous search for better economic conditions; later these ideas evolved to be focused on education agents, since critical philosophers like Frankfurt schools' philosophers realized that the first and most relevant step of social transformation is in the schools. It is evident that most of the critical pedagogues' conceptions suggest that critical pedagogy has as a main purpose generating social change in such a way that people develop social awareness for them to become agents of an equity society. Critical pedagogy practices are not only focused on school contexts, it is available to reflect and undertake social actions in relation to different social issues where oppression and

social injustice exist. Shrewsbury, Lather, Hooks and Weiler refer to critical pedagogy as a tool to emphasize women's consciousness in relation to oppressive social structure in such a way women can realize, and undertake the social change that they need.

Learners' and women's injustice and oppression are only two situations, in our contemporary society there are many unfair social situations to be analyzed and changed by critical pedagogy praxis. Nowadays social injustice exists; people from different social groups are oppressed by violence and discrimination. Hegemonies, political power and economic domination have not died yet, they have taken roots in our society; government members earn the best salaries while people who belong to 1 and 2 strata have to work hard to earn a minimum salary; politicians make the decision of what poor and low strata people must do; people who have money buy all what they want without paying attention on others' suffering and pain. Many families are obligated to renounce to their economic resources to save their own and relatives' lives, since kidnapping has become the worst way of social oppression and injustice in our society. Murder, gender violence, prostitution, discrimination, bullying and other oppressive social situations have placed on our society. Silence and submission are the keys to survive; people who have power have become annihilation hegemonies. In the work context, many workers and underage people have to work hard every day, but they do not have the basic conditions to live a dignified life. For many students going to school has become a vain routine, for them school seems to be an isolated world

unrelated to their real lives and experiences. We as critical teachers must undertake actions to change that students' perception, actions to generate a social change; we can undertake that change propitiating spaces for students to dialogue among them and between them and the teacher, but it must be a conscious dialogue, a dialogue when they and the teacher meet to reflect on their reality (Freire and Shor, 1987). Dialogue generates knowledge and self-awareness, this awareness encourages students' voices, and learners' voices strengthen them to transform their unfair society into an equal society.

Research on the Critical Pedagogy Field

The research in the field of critical pedagogy has shown that critical pedagogy praxis can help human beings to understand and solve different difficult social situations that are consequences of social injustice. Mary Breuing (2006) shows a research study carried out by Ruiz and Fernandez Balboa (2005). This study was conducted on seventeen physical education teachers. The researchers examined professors' critical praxis and concluded that 11 of the 17 self-identified critical pedagogues did not have clear definitions of critical pedagogy and three of the study participants did not have definitions for it at all. Mohr (1999) in his article called "Hate studies through constructivist and critical pedagogy approach" claims "critical pedagogy takes a great relevance in analyzing students' hate attitudes because it leads society to seek ways to confront hate in a manner that lessens its impact and permits everyone to develop to his or her fullest potential without fear of reprisal" (p. 8). The field of hate

studies has been proposed as one manner of analyzing hate and developing effective methods of understanding, combating and controlling it. (Potitzer, 2005; Stern, 2004). Thus critical pedagogy provides teachers and students with the guidance to think about their intentions, to challenge and question their own practices, and to understand themselves as participatory agents responsible for the construction of societal ideas, values, and structures. Henry Giroux has conducted cultural studies in relation to critical pedagogy. These cultural studies are animated by the hope to reconstruct schooling with critical perspectives that can help us to better understand and transform contemporary culture and society in the contemporary era (Kellner, 2005). Giroux tries to link critical pedagogy and cultural studies to develop a more democratic culture and citizenry. The result is a transformative political dimension to critical pedagogy and a pedagogical dimension to cultural studies. Wishert and Lashua (2000) wrote about a study related to the participants' culture. The researchers examined how they and other teachers used popular culture as critical pedagogy. The participants of the study were between fourteen and twenty one. They each had different experiences in school like gaps in their education for a few months to several years and attending different schools. The poverty was a primary concern for all the students, and most of them lived independently or in a group - home settings. Teachers adopted a popular theatre approach because it allowed inexperienced and less articulated participants to do sophisticated social analysis (Cloutier, 2002). Popular theatre strives for change by including individuals as groups or members

of communities, identifying issues of concern and paths of change, and analyzing how change could happen (Prentki and Selman, 2000). In this way participants were able to express their own social realities and work toward appropriate responses. In this study, the relation between critical pedagogy and participants' culture is evident, since, the participants' culture became the main source for students to realize and analyze their unjust social order, to understand how this injustice has caused problems in their lives, and how they can solve or avoid these difficult situations. In this sense, different cultures manifestations and expressions can be a source of information to identify, reflect and undertake actions in relation to issues of concern. The knowledge and exploration of students' own culture are two of the most relevant factors in order for students to become critical and active agents of social change.

How Can Students' Culture Become a Resource for Critical Learning Teaching Process?

English learning involves more than the mastery of language grammar and lexis; the socio - cultural component is also relevant because if learners are not aware of their own culture and about the culture where the language emerges, the learning process becomes difficult and insignificant for students. Norton and Toohey (2004) state that language is not simply a means of expression or communication; rather, it is a practice that constructs and is constructed by the ways language learners understand themselves, their social surroundings, their histories and their possibilities for the future. Canagarajah (1999) claims "socio – cultural

conditions always influence on cognitive activity, mediating how we perceive and interpret the world around us" (p. 56). It evidences that cultural conditions influence on languages generation as well as learning process, the culture understood as a system of values, beliefs, perceptions, attitudes and customs, provides to its members with tools to know and understand the world, and when the learning conditions generate approaches to other cultures, many students experience a difficult transition to know and understand the culture where the foreign language emerges. The learning process is also a democratic activity and we as English teachers need to avoid sudden invasions into the English culture (input totally focused on English culture at the beginning of the English learning process), since, if we do not provide time and spaces in order for students to assimilate the intercultural relation, we become agents of learning oppression. Thus, it is important that students' own culture takes part in the English learning process, firstly, it facilitates the intercultural relation in a democratic way, secondly, it is the main element in order for students to reflect about themselves and develop awareness in relation to the English language learning.

Learners' Own culture and Critical Pedagogy Praxis

But how can we establish that link between the English learning process and learners' own culture? Learners' own culture is the easiest and most available tool for students to reflect and develop consciousness, since their own culture is a close reflection of what they are, and if they find that their cultural conditions are involved in their learning

process, they will understand that the school is not an isolated context where they get lots of information not useful for their personal and social development, but a space where the reflection and radical actions are motivated through a deeper knowledge and recognition of their own culture. Thus, if teachers carry out learning activities which are related to the students' real lives, learners not only will learn in an easier way, but they will be motivated and affected, and therefore, they will perceive and realize that learning activities are relevant and useful for them. Freire (1970) supports this idea claiming that content related to learners' life experiences and existential situations must be the starting point for education since it is a source of motivation for students.

We as teachers can bring to the classroom materials and contents which are closely related to their life experiences like texts related to students' daily activities (family strolls, relatives' meetings, pastimes), readings which tell local myths, legends, traditions, festivities and other local events, local games and sports adapted to the English language; we can promote and guide discussions, debates and performances about local social situations and motivate the elaboration of posters, collages, and pictures based on learners' preferences and likes. For a clearer example, mentioning only one topic of the English class, "describing people and places", we as teachers can carry out different activities like adjective classification, finding adjectives in readings, and matching meanings. We can use some strategies like providing students with a disorganized list of adjectives in order for students classify them with adjectives to

describe physical features and adjectives to describe personality. The same list in two columns is great to match meanings. In a reading, we can underline adjectives in order for students to look for the meaning of those words, after students classify the adjectives in physical and personality adjectives, the teacher can provide the integral description of one of their classmates, and then, when students have identified the main ideas of the text, in groups, they can describe another of their classmates. In this sense, English Language Learning not only becomes easier, but at the same time generates self-knowledge and recognition which are relevant to think and reflect about their social conditions.

Foreign Culture and Critical English Learning Process

Though the students' culture has a relevant importance in the English learning process, the contact with a foreign culture always has a place, since language is the voice of the culture, and the culture is the plant of the language. But it is seen as a negative aspect in the English learning process because some students consider that learning English implies to adopt the culture where the language emerges. Besides, they do not find it relevant to learn English; I have heard students who say that they do not need to learn English because they live in a country where the mother tongue is Spanish, and therefore they can live without speaking English. Others say "we do not have the money or the necessity to travel to a country where the English language is spoken". However, the contact with a foreign culture – English culture- does not mean the loss of local or foreign culture. On the contrary, it

is a chance to know, reflect, value and develop their critical consciousness about local and foreign cultures respectively. The foreign culture knowledge allows the students to recognize the external and internal factors that affect negatively their life conditions. The foreign culture becomes a mirror in which the students can see themselves and observe how they are living and acting as members of a culture. If people, and in this case the learners stay inside their own culture without observing or interacting with other worlds (cultures), they will not find it easy to know and recognize how they are being marginalized in their own context and culture. Knowing about foreign cultures contributes to students to foster their cultural identity because when people recognize the difference among the cultures, they discover and value what is their own since they have found a new environment to observe, compare, and thus to know similarities and differences; while, if cultures and communities do not have at least one different context to observe the differences between own and foreign contexts, they stay anchored inside their own culture without realizing that there are situations that must be changed. Thus, the contact with a foreign culture does not imply to adopt it, this enhances learners' knowledge about what they need to foster or change in their own contexts in such a way that they can live in an equitable world.

Local and Foreign Cultures Integration as Means to Generate Critical Consciousness and Will on English Language Learners

How can we as English teachers conduct our students to develop a critical awareness

and will in the English language learning process using local and foreign cultures integration? As I said before the input focused on students' own culture is relevant at the beginning of the English learning process because it facilitates learning and connection with foreign culture; however, it is also relevant that English teachers bring to English learning environments input and materials related to the foreign culture – English culture. But, input and materials as well as class activities need to be contextualized by teachers to facilitate students' comprehension and understanding. For instance, if we bring to the classroom texts that provide information about touristic places from other countries - teachers must tell the students what the context of that text is. My experiences as an English teacher has lead me to observe that in different situations, students cannot understand even the main information of the text because they cannot identify peoples' cities and places' names; they look for the meaning of these words in dictionaries and they do not find them. If we as teachers contextualize input and materials related to English culture, we not only facilitate learners' understanding, but we contribute to enhance students' knowledge and consciousness about cultural variations. Little by little, students are going to develop a critical consciousness, which allows them to open their minds and know other ways of life; not to adopt them, but to be aware that each social group has particular characteristics that make it different, and that those differences cannot obstruct the relations among different cultures.

Manjarres (2009) affirms that foreign language learners often know a lot of

grammar and vocabulary, even how to greet, invite and request information; but these verbal functions are not always contextualized. This means that the construction of meaning and senses differ from one context to others based on the cultural characteristics that determine the consolidation of each social group. Hence what is polite in a certain context cannot be polite in another. Therefore, learners who want to become clear and pertinent with a foreign language (communicative competence) must not only have knowledge about cultural features that determine culture, such as ways of dressing, eating, carrying out celebrations and others, but also they must know and understand the different connotations or senses that certain language uses can have in that context. A clear example to illustrate this idea is the use of idioms, since these are local and particular expressions that can only be understood and used adequately when these are located and analyzed bearing in mind the socio – cultural context in which these emerge. What helps us to understand and use correctly those local expressions is not the grammar and lexis knowledge, but rather the knowledge and understanding of the culture in which those expressions exist. When students are able to recognize, understand, and use pertinently a foreign language, according to the characteristics of the context in which that language emerges, it is evident that students have developed their critical consciousness because recognition and understanding are indispensable previous steps in order to become a critical person. If the students do not get recognition and understanding about their own culture as well as about foreign culture, they cannot become aware because

the learning process is not contextualized, but instead a mechanical activity.

Alvarez and Bonilla (2009) say that “learning a language goes hand in hand with the understanding of not only the target culture, but the learners’ own culture” (p. 123, 124). In the English learning process, a gap between local and foreign cultures is not possible, since the language is the expression of the culture, and the culture part of the human beings’ identity, therefore English learning process and individuals cannot be separated from the culture where they have emerged and lived respectively.

Another democratic process takes place here, since teachers and students need to establish an intercultural relation between both local and foreign cultures. This intercultural relation known as intercultural competence must be equitable in such a way that any of the two cultures be affected or invaded. Edward (1998) stays that intercultural competence is an ability that enables you to interact both effectively and in a way that is acceptable to others when you are working in a group whose members have different cultural backgrounds. When local and foreign cultures are integrated in a democratic way, we as teachers provide spaces and opportunities in order for students to encourage and develop their intercultural competence in such a way that they to be able to communicate and establish relations with people from different cultures without rejecting their own culture. In this sense, intercultural competence is a part of critical pedagogy’s actions, since when learners develop their intercultural competence they enhance their consciousness not only in relation to foreign

culture, but also in relation to their own. When learners develop their intercultural competence, they become intercultural speakers. “An intercultural speaker is a tolerant and open minded person who is able to interact with other members cultures taking into account cultural differences.” (Kramersch, 2002, p. 128). Intercultural speakers are people who have developed a high level of social awareness which allow them to make important decisions

Teaching Materials in a Critical English Learning Teaching Process

In my experience as an English teacher, I have observed that many public and rural schools do not have quantified materials to teach; we can find some textbooks, but these are not pertinent for a critical learning as they are only focused on grammar and these do not provide any activity related to the communicative competence. In other cases, schools have gotten some other materials, such as audio books and other audiovisual materials, but schools do not have enough and good equipment such as televisions, and Video Beams to use them. Therefore, materials must be planned, designed and elaborated based on students' needs and characteristics, in such a way that materials conduct learners to self-recognition and reflection of their personal and social conditions. Materials based on students and context characteristics evidence personal and social situations in order for learners to know, reflect and undertake actions in relation to them; as an example, Littlejohn (2011) stays if we want that the students develop critical engagement with the media, we can show them newspaper articles which enable

learners to become independent thinkers and thus more empowered.

In a critical learning process, we as teachers can also use real facts and materials to illustrate and support our teaching practices. In a class where the topic is “describing people and places”, I as a teacher can list some physical or personality characteristics of one of my students and then describe him, or describe a known place like the school garden. In a lesson where the purpose is to learn and use commands like “turn off” and “turn on”, we can do the real actions using school equipment or students' cell phones; another way is that students set their cell phones in English language, they will not only learn these commands, but lots of vocabulary too. If the purpose of the class is to learn commands, vocabulary and basic grammar structures in relation to food preparation, we can guide the preparation of some recipes. These activities are practical, related to students' culture, and useful for the learners' real lives. Materials which are related to students' experiences and culture gain attractiveness and offer a much richer source of input for learners (Little and Singleton, 1991; Gilmore, 2007). Nevertheless, the materials focused on the foreign culture like readings, adapted games, recorded dialogues, videos, songs are also relevant to the processes of English Language learning and consciousness development because these provide knowledge and generate discussion and reflection on learners.

Conclusions

In short, the learning of a foreign language cannot be separated from learners' culture

nor the culture where the languages emerges, since cultures are the main sources of information to carry out authentic and significant teaching practices that not only contribute to educate learners to be able to provide cognitive answers, but for them to be critical citizens who will be able to solve their personal and social difficulties in such a way that they can achieve better life conditions. When a foreign language learning process is carried out, students' culture and foreign culture cannot be passed over, they provide the best data for learning English and develop critical awareness. But if we as teachers do not use this source of information (local and foreign cultures) to achieve pertinent contents and materials, our teaching practices will be vain and useless. On the contrary, if we make that the integration between local and foreign cultures be pertinent bringing to the school resources according to students' needs and characteristics, this culture integration not only makes the learning process meaningful and useful for learners, but this integration conducts learners to know, recognize and encourage their cultural identity and become authentic intercultural speakers. However, and before beginning to promote the generation of critical consciousness on our learners, it is important that we as teachers have a critical consciousness to know how to conduct and guide the different teaching practices in such a way that each activity we do in our classes contributes to avoid social injustice and achieve human beings' realization and development respectively. We as English teachers must be the main agents to carry out critical pedagogy's practices, in our classes, we must provide spaces in order for learners to know and reflect on the social issues that enhance or

affect negatively their lives and communities. The language, the "living" language is always a communication means to express who we are and what we want.

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