

TEACHING ENGLISH THROUGH CRITICAL PEDAGOGY: AN INSIGHT INTO ENGINEERING CLASSROOM

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Abstract:

English language teaching to engineering students has been facing considerable challenge in India as it requires meeting the high corporate demands of professional communication skills. Therefore, there is an urgent need to address this issue and to implement innovative approaches to Language classroom. The present research paper attempts to explore how the implementation of Critical Pedagogy Practices in English language classroom affects the performance of engineering students. It investigates how learning with Critical Pedagogy encourages students not just to interpret but to develop critical consciousness. The paper probes deep into the language classroom to ensure that teaching and learning objectives manifest collaborative activities and improves students' communication skills as well as English Language Teaching in an engineering classroom. It attempts to examine how in a language classroom critical pedagogy practices help in developing contextualize learning experiences and promote cooperative learning, students' questions and problem-solving methods and transform different ways of learning.

Key words: *Critical Pedagogy, English Language classroom, Engineering Education.*

Introduction:

Critical pedagogy has been debated for more than four decades and appears in many and varied constructions and characterizations. The term critical pedagogy became recognized in the seminal writings of Paulo Freire, the father of critical pedagogy, especially with work of Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1972). Some of the important critical pedagogues who have followed Freire and advanced the discourse are Henry Giroux, Ira Shor, Joe K Kincheloe, Bell Hooks and many others. It is primarily an interrogative discourse that asks questions to diverse aspects of society and its organizations in relation to caste, class, gender and histories of marginalization and subordination. Ira Shor (cited in Pennycook, 1999) nicely characterizes critical pedagogy as “Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impression, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology and personal circumstances of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media or discourse.” (p 129)

Critical pedagogy aims at social transformation by making the individuals of the society critical and empowered enough to make their voices loud to be heard. When social transformation comes to focus, education proves to be a political issue in the need of being dealt politically. Critical pedagogy focuses on the need of reforming education in a way that it would acknowledge the influence of social and political elements existent in every educational context. It brings everything including curriculum, materials, teachers, and learners under its influence to create a healthy classroom-social relationship with no dominant policy overhanging in the minds of individuals. It strictly rejects a “blanket approach” and promotes an atmosphere where the individuals with different identities and voices are to be heard,

appreciated, discussed and developed to attain a power to analyze their own place in the society.

Teacher and student engagement is critical in the classroom because it has the power to define whose knowledge will become a part of knowledge and whose voices will shape it. Critical pedagogy looks at students not just as young people for whom adults should devise solutions but as critical observers of their own conditions and needs. It considers them as active participants in discussions and problem solving related to their education and future opportunities. Hence students should be made aware that their experiences and perceptions are important, and they should be encouraged to develop the mental skills needed to think and reason independently and should have the courage to dissent. Critical pedagogy promotes a definite participatory learning and teaching atmosphere in the classroom. It believes while classroom participation is a powerful strategy it becomes an instrument to enable teachers to meet their own ends as true participation starts from the experiences of both students and teachers.

Advocates of critical approaches to second language teaching are interested in relationships between language learning and social change. From this perspective, 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. (Norton & Toohey, 3)

Literature Review:

Pennycook (1999) has stated that “critical work in TESOL is an attempt to locate aspects of teaching English to speakers of other languages within a board, critical view of social and political relations.” (332) Crookes and Lehner have explained that “Critical pedagogy in ES/FL), then, takes as joint goals the simultaneous development of English communicative abilities together with the ability to apply them to developing a critical. Awareness of the world and the ability to act on it was to improve matters.” (320)

CP was perceived to be the realization of the Critical Thinking of the Frankfurt School. Marcuse argued that instead of the process of schooling serving as free space for intellectual discourse, “it withholds opportunities for learners to formulate their own aims and goals and essentially de-skill students.” (Apple, 43). The theorists of Frankfurt argued schools espouse dependency of learners to teachers and hierarchical understanding of authority which undermine the kind of social consciousness that change, and social transformation necessitates. To this, Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire responded through developing the concept of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

In his works, Freire argued for the need of an emancipatory model of education as he understood, coming from his background as educational worker for the poor and the marginalized in Brazil, that schools had become impediments to the education of the poor. According to Breuning, this realization made Freire “argue that people need to engage in a praxis that incorporates theory, action, and reflection as a means to work toward social change and justice.” (p 4) Hence, he developed the idea of Critical Pedagogy which would serve as response to marginalization and oppression. Several theorists have also proposed their conceptions of CP and its goals. For Vandrick, the major goal of CP is “to emancipate and educate all people regardless of their gender, class, race, and many others.” (p 92). Kanpol (1998), on the other hand, argued that CP is founded on the belief that citizens ought to have an education which involves understanding the schooling structure by the teacher that would not permit education to ensue. Meanwhile, Gadotti (1994) inferred that the works of Freire on CP seek to change the structure of an oppressive society. In general, all these studies suggest that Critical Language Pedagogy is a political approach in language teaching that, in the course of teaching the language, confronts social issues (i.e. social injustice and forms of oppression) in an attempt to address them. Furthermore, through a review of these literature and studies, some principles that make up CLP are derived. These principles are CLP's essential characteristics and are therefore fundamental to the understanding of the concept. In traditional classes, the teacher is the agent of

knowledge transfer and students are knowledge consumers. But in the new approach, the teacher is the agent of change and sets the right condition for the exchange of ideas, as a result, they all learn together, they all teach each other. Freire (2002) believes in a more fluid relationship between teachers and students, so that learning goes both ways; teachers are learners and learners are teachers (cited in Giroux, 2004).

Discussion

Language is not just a tool for communication. It is a good approach that makes the learners engage in a fluid relationship between society and texts. Critical pedagogy brings a new sociopolitical view of linguistics and language teaching that influences the teaching of English to speakers of other languages field. Critical language pedagogy (CLP) is an approach to language pedagogy where language teaching becomes a tool for developing learners who are critically aware of social problems that emanate from oppression and injustice; and, who are able to argue and propose solutions to these problems, consequently triggering critical discourse in the classroom. English Language learning in Indian classroom is not an isolated process; it is an amalgamation of multiple voices and multiple identities. Critical pedagogy builds a bridge between L1 (mother tongue) and L2 (English) by giving space to these multiple voices and multiple identities and transforming language learning into an agent of social change. Several studies had also been conducted to find out the implementation of critical pedagogy in English language classroom.

“The concept of critical pedagogy (CP) has been around in the ELT for almost two decades” (Canagarajah, 05), but it has only been recently that a heightened interest in its principles and practical implications has been seen. Looking at sociology of English in India, critical pedagogy aims to question 'deprivation' on the grounds of not knowing a language. Critical Pedagogy in English Language classroom makes an essential contribution to the Indian cultures of pedagogy in its commitment to praxis in order to transform oppressive condition, to empower oppressed groups to challenge the unjust order rather than accepting it as the way things are. Breaking from the colonial past English has come a long way and it has turned into a globally accepted language. In this situation it is crucial for engineering students to prepare themselves effective communication skills to compete globally. For engineering students, it is supposed to be more important as they work in the area of telecom, information and communication technology, robotics, building and other engineering areas which require accuracy, personality development and effective communication skills. They need to think critically to provide a reasonable argument and show a high level of professionalism. Consequently, it is crucial to introduce such new pedagogy to English language classroom of engineers which can evolve them into professional engineers. To conceptualize, apply, analyze and evaluate the importance of critical pedagogy, it is obvious that wide range of methods and approaches should be added to develop better communication skills among engineering students. Taking the needs of engineering students into account teachers can design lesson plans, study programs and curriculum with a peculiar focus on engineering students' creativity and critical thinking development.

In present age students' acquisition of a language is measured in terms of their ability to communicate in the English language along with the theoretical knowledge. Critical Pedagogy aims to encourage the learners not just to interpret but to change the world. In this pedagogical approach students participate in developing contextualize learning experience that helps to redefine their role in the society. In a language classroom, it creates consciousness by avoiding authoritarian teacher pupil models. Based on actual experience of students and on continual shared investigation each individual can develop a new awareness of self and begin to look critically at the world through relationship with others. The teacher can examine issues which students see as significant to their community and then can initiate action to influence these events. In view of that Paulo Freire's concepts and ideas are closely connected to attributes as a teacher and with today's education on execution into own students, classroom and teaching styles. In order to successfully reinvent Critical pedagogy practice in context of English language classroom for engineering students in India many views and issues can be addressed. As the pedagogy puts the classroom

context into the wider social context with the belief that 'what happens in classroom should end up making a difference outside the classroom.' (Akbari, 08) The discourse of CP is the discourse of liberation and hope. "In language teaching, critical practice is about connecting the word with the world. It is about recognizing language as ideology, not just system. It is about extending the educational space to the social, cultural and political dynamics of language use." (Kumaravadivelu, 06).

Engineering classroom students need to excel their spoken skills. They have to compete for good group discussion skills. In a classroom of Engineers, implementation of language teaching which involves bringing issues from wider social context for social transformation can be added. Language teachers can play a more active social role by including themes from wider society in their classes and by drawing the attention of their students to the way marginalized people feel and act. ELT classroom needs to give space to evolve a meaningful critical pedagogy. The teacher can provide situations where student can try to communicate their own cultural values and conceptualization in the target language.

"By including more of the learning first language in L2 settings and through judicious use of students' L1 as a teaching aid, language teachers can create the context, where the first steps to work empowerment and positive social change can be taken." (Akbari 08)

Engineering students want English for instrumental purposes. They prefer a module which can teach them effective communication skills and strategies to survive in a job wanted. Their focus is to learn to the texts that are pitched at a level higher than the learners' current level of competence. Critical pedagogy helps them in attaining that. To integrate CP in an engineering classroom a pedagogy process can be incorporated which aims to teach language through methods and materials that draw on the local milieus, themes and topics. It will help the students to be socially and politically involved for group discussion. As they will learn language through those topics and notion to which they initially identify themselves.

From a CP perspective, it would have been advisable to include the topics for group discussion that can bring transformations to the immediate lives of the engineering students. Students can be exposed to a leading passage or a group activity which make them familiar with the current topics. It will improve their adequate communication skills and sound background knowledge of socio-cultural and historical event. As a follow up communication activity the students can be divided into groups and can be given gap filling exercise. Using the text, the teacher can talk to learner about this area in general to generate sufficient interest in them to follow the lesson. The only pre requisites are a bilingual dictionary and some mother tongue use. Once the attention of learners is captured it is easy to sustain it and give them more input in largest language by and by.

Use of the text where learners can identify with easily and immediately can also give a direction to the implementation of CP for engineering student. Their attention can also be grabbed by providing those topics related to caste, race or gender discrimination. They can be asked to describe the discrimination of these, one faces when he applies for jobs, looks for accommodation, appears for an interview etc. Such discussions are not only productive but they also open up a whole new wide range of meaning and significant periods of introspection both to learners and the teachers.

There is also a need to come up with materials and activities that make learning and teaching address their needs. Teachers can give them tasks to write essays, articles, columns, blogs that appear in the local newspapers magazines and journals to use as an authentic material in engineering classroom. Short stories, essays and novels by Indian writers of English such as RKNarayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Ruskin Bond, Mahasweta Dutta can be used as an effective tool to add texture and richness of English will an Indian identity. In addition to teaching language, these materials can inform the learners about their responsibility towards the society where they inhabit.

Debates and talks can be organized on a whole range of topics and issue that not only generate their

interest but also attempt to transform them into responsible citizen accomplishing the mission that CP aims to achieve. Incorporation of topics from their day to day life like study, love, friendship, adventure, food, generation to the topics related jobs oriented issues- startups, jobs, wars, tourism that topics that often appear in newspaper and are much talked about can be added.

CP puts the classroom context into the wider social context with the belief that what happens in classroom should end up making a difference outside the classroom. In language teaching critical practice is about connecting the word with world. It is about recognizing language as ideology, not just system. It is about extending the educational space to the social, cultural and political dynamics of language use. If ELT has to make a difference then the totality of experiences of learners need to be addressed. A teacher can play a more active role by including themes, topics, issues from the wider society in the classes and by drawing the attention of their students to the way marginalized people feel and act “by including more of the learners first language in L2 settings and through judicious use of students L1 as a teaching aid language teachers can create the context, where the first step towards empowerment and positive social change can be taken.” (Akbari 08)

Conclusion:

ELT classroom needs to give space to multiple voices to implement a critical pedagogy. It should be taken as joint goals for the simultaneous development of English communication abilities together with the ability to apply them to developing a critical awareness of the world for improvement. To achieve such an end, students in the classrooms need to become critical and empowered enough to make their voices loud enough in order to be heard. When social transformation comes to focus there is also a need to deal it politically. This kind of system brings everything including curriculum, materials, teachers and learners under its influence. CP through critical thinking looks to create a healthy classroom social relationship with no dominant policy overhanging in the minds of individuals. Critical pedagogy is not a method, it is an attitude. Once attitude changes things fall in place. It has to be conceded that discussions on CP have been limited to its rationale and not much has been done to bring it down to “the actual world of classroom practice, for which it was originally intended.” (Akbari, 08)

The teacher's subjectivity and classroom situations interact in dialectic fashion to shape the nature of classroom teaching. The primary goal of critical pedagogy is guided by the goal of formulating educational practices that can contribute towards shaping a democratic culture and social vision in the classroom and society. In a general way critical pedagogy would imply educational practices that draw on the postulates of critical theory in order to examine the status of education in understanding in what ways it marginalizes and alienates people in a society creating discriminatory conditions while distributing knowledge. Critical Pedagogy is an attitude to language teaching which involves bringing issues, from wider social context to the language classroom and aims at social transformation through education in general, and language education in particular.

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

“Unlike most of the other concepts and ideas one encounters in the literature on language teaching, CP is not a theory, but a way of 'doing, learning and teaching.” (Canagarajah, 01) It is teaching with an attitude for the transformation of society through language teaching. It is a way to language teaching which involves bringing issues, from wider social context to the language classroom and aims at social

transformation through education in general, and language education in particular. The discourse of CP, however, is the discourse of liberation and hope. It is the discourse of liberation since it questions the legitimacy of accepted power relations and recognizes the necessity of going beyond social constraints. If ELT must make a difference, then the totality of the experiences of learners needs to be addressed. While the voice of the powerful and the dominant finds representation in the classrooms, many learners belonging to varied socio-cultural and economic backgrounds silently wait for their opportunity to be heard. Besides, many issues are taught as normal to the learners and very rarely do learners muster the courage to question these practices. Hence this paper argues that Critical Pedagogy through varied discursive practices can serve to empower engineering students in Indian classroom and enable them to express their views regarding issues that affect them and find the connection between the world built for them in the classroom with the real world outside. It is considered essential for educationists and teaching practitioners to wear a critical lens as they are regarded as the next best agents of socialization after parents. For applied linguists and language teachers, critical skills are useful to understand “the ways in which education, regulation, and the study and use of language relate to the realization, maintenance, and reproduction of the distribution of power in society.” (Mahboob and Paltridge, 2012)

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