

Critical Language Teacher Education

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FINAL DRAFT

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Introduction

As global migration makes classrooms increasingly diverse, there is growing concern about the lack of school success for students of color, those who live in poverty, immigrants and refugees, and minority language speakers. Such learners are often marginalized, thus denied equal access to social and material resources that support acquisition of the language and literacy skills that promote full participation in classrooms and communities. While many policy and social service documents continue to focus on what these learners are lacking - locating the ‘problem’ as deficiencies in the learners - current research in the fields of education and language learning is recognizing that there is a mismatch between educational systems and pedagogies, and the learners that they serve. In response, theories that reconceptualize learning and learning environments are emerging that represent new ways of thinking about the goals of education, the roles of teachers and learners, and the processes of learning.

Perhaps the most visible and widely represented paradigms that challenge traditional views of language, teaching and learning are *sociocultural* (see chapter #x) and *critical* approaches. In this chapter we provide a discussion of what “critical” has come to mean in educational and applied linguistics research, theory, and practice, and what it might mean for second language teaching and language teacher education. We survey the literature on critical language teacher education to offer exemplars of current pedagogies and practices across diverse contexts. We then identify a number of principles associated with critical language teacher education, and conclude with a discussion, in classic critical tradition, that both supports and problematizes this notion.

Defining “critical”

There is much debate about what is meant by a “critical approach” to education and applied linguistics. Educators confront a smorgasbord of terms, including critical theory, critical pedagogy, critical literacy, critical applied linguistics, critical language awareness, critical discourse analysis, and critical reflection. To complicate the debate, other terms are often used interchangeably, e.g., liberatory education, social justice education, education for equity, transformative practice, empowerment, and praxis. So what do these mean, and, more specifically, what is “critical” about them?

Critical theory, initially attributed to the Frankfurt school of critical theory (Habermas, 1976), challenges constructs such as naturalism, rationality, and neutrality, referencing instead the subjective, the social, and the partisan nature of reality, and the ways in which our understandings of the world are constructed by contextual factors that are ideologically informed. It enables us to see that our ideas, interactions, language use, texts, learning practices, and so forth, are not neutral and objective, but are shaped by and

within social relationships that systematically advantage some people over others, thus producing and re-producing inequitable relationships of power in society.

While critical theory is predominantly abstract, critical pedagogy is directly concerned with social action and educational change. Rooted in the work of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator whose mission was the emancipation of peasants in colonial and postcolonial societies, critical pedagogy seeks to empower people to challenge oppressive conditions in their lives. One central tenet in Freire's work, which we will take up in this chapter, is *praxis*: the site where theory and practice come together to create action that leads to social and political change. Freire advocated for dialogue, or the importance of engaging in a *dialogic process*, as a means to make visible ideologies and relations of power, and the ways in which people are situated within them (Freire 1973, 1974).

"Critical", then, refers to a focus on how dominant ideologies in society drive the construction of understandings and meanings in ways that privilege certain groups of people, while marginalizing others. In this spirit, Luke (1997) defines critical literacy as ...characterized by a commitment to reshape literacy education in the interests of marginalized groups of learners, who on the basis of gender, cultural and socioeconomic background have been excluded from access to the discourses and texts of dominant economies and cultures. (p. 143)

Theorists and researchers have examined how language shapes and reproduces power relations in society. As Fairclough (1995) claims: "It is mainly in discourse that consent is achieved, ideologies are transmitted, and practices, meanings, values and identities are taught and learnt" (p.219). Fairclough advocates for *critical language awareness*, to recognize "...nontransparent aspects of the social functioning of language" (p. 224). He views *critical discourse analysis* as one aspect of this work. Critical discourse analysis is a set of methodological tools that enables researchers to describe and analyze the relationship between language and the social world (see also Gee, 1999; Rogers, 2004). Within applied linguistics, Pennycook (2001) offers the concept of *critical applied linguistics*, arguing for, "...the importance of relating micro relations of applied linguistics to macro relations of society." (p. 2). It is perhaps this work that best links notions of "critical" to language learning and teaching.

Why critical language teacher education?

The concept of "critical" is especially salient for language teachers. Because language, culture, and identity are integrally related, language teachers are in a key position to address educational inequality, both because of the particular learners they serve, many of whom are marginalized members of the wider community, and because of the subject matter they teach --language-- which can itself serve to both empower and marginalize. Language teachers are often the first contacts that newcomers (immigrants, migrants, and refugees) have in the target language community, and they serve as social mediators and informants in the new environment. They play a key role in the construction of the learners' views of their new homes, their understandings of unfamiliar belief systems, values and practices, and their negotiations of new social relationships. For those who practice in contexts in which the language they teach is not the majority language, and whose students may be members of the mainstream community, they nevertheless represent the values, beliefs and practices of the cultural groups with whom

the new language is associated. Critical language teachers make transparent the complex relationships between majority and minority speakers and cultural groups, and between diverse speakers of the majority language, thus having the potential to disrupt potentially harmful and oppressive relations of power.

Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) claims that within the next generation, 90% of languages currently in use will disappear. She claims that as speakers of indigenous languages are schooled in another, dominant, language, they come to view their mother tongue as less useful and developed, ultimately abandoning it in favor of the new language. Critical language teachers are aware of issues surrounding linguistic genocide, and work to mitigate this damage through finding educational alternatives that promote access to new languages, while maintaining and valuing heritage languages.

Although language is the primary medium used to teach any subject matter, for language teachers it is both the medium and the content. Because language (or discourse) is the tool through which representations and meanings are constructed and negotiated, and a primary means through which ideologies are transmitted, language itself is not neutral, but is shot through with meanings, inflections, intentions and assumptions. Rather than have learners internalize such meanings as normal and right, critical language teachers work with their students to deconstruct language, texts, and discourses, in order to investigate whose interests they serve and what messages are both explicitly and implicitly conveyed. How can language teacher education support teachers to develop such critical practices?

Critical language teacher education practices

McDonald & Zeichner (2008) discuss the current move from multicultural teacher education to social justice teacher education. They claim that multicultural teacher education focuses on “celebrat(ion) of cultural diversity and the experience of the individual”, while ignoring the “institutionalized relationships among groups.” This is to say that, while multicultural teacher education does acknowledge status differences among people based on culture, ethnicity, and language, it does not take up the explicit study of the production and reproduction of power relationships in institutions (such as schools) and society. Social justice teacher education seeks to address institutionalized as well as individual power differentials, with the goal of promoting teachers’ recognition and ownership of their roles as social activists.

There is a growing body of literature within the fields of TESOL, Applied Linguistics, and Second Language Acquisition that addresses critical theoretical stances around language use, language teaching, and language planning (e.g., Canagarajah, 1999; Hawkins, 2004a; Norton 2000; Pennycook 2001; Phillipson, 1992; Ricento, 2006; Tollefson, 2002). There are also accounts, although more rare, of critical language teaching practices, most often authored by the language teacher (e.g., Morgan 1998; TESOL Quarterly special issue, 1999). More difficult to find are accounts of critical language teacher education practices. Below we discuss accounts we have found of critical practices in language teacher education, which can be categorized as promoting, respectively, *critical awareness*, *critical self-reflection*, and *critical pedagogical relations*. These accounts span international locales, in-service and pre-service programs, undergraduate and graduate courses, and experiences both within and outside of institutions of higher education. We acknowledge that these accounts only address

instances where English is the target language, and do not wish to imply that critical work is not being done in language teacher education in other languages; however, this is the literature base to which we have access. Although there are no neat boundaries between these three categorizations, we use them as heuristic tools to guide analyses of practices, and highlight, in each account, the notion of *praxis* as well. We do this not in an attempt to be prescriptive, but to provide models that illustrate the range of practices associated with critical language teacher education.

Critical Awareness

A key focus of critical teacher educators is to promote critical awareness in their teacher learners by raising consciousness about the ways in which power relations are constructed and function in society, and the extent to which historical, social, and political practices structure educational inequity. We describe three cases in which teacher educators attempt to make visible to teacher learners inequitable relations of power in their communities, and the ways in which these affect the language learners they teach.

Tara Goldstein (2004) describes her implementation of performed ethnography with pre-service teachers in Canada, based on a play she wrote entitled ‘Hong Kong Canada’, which represents tensions experienced in multilingual and multicultural high school settings. Goldstein describes how her teacher learners perform the play, and how she then facilitates discussion of their affective responses. She asks them to identify issues and dilemmas represented, focusing in particular on the power of *linguistic privilege*. Goldstein discusses and reflects on pedagogical possibilities that arise from discussion about the play. In this example, praxis begins with the recognition of existing inequitable social conditions, and moves to a realization of the teacher learners’ abilities to effect educational change.

In a very different setting, Alastair Pennycook (2004) offers an insightful reflection on what it means to be a critical teacher educator, coining the term “praxicum” to capture how theory and practice come together to create new understandings of the TESOL practicum. In his account of a supervisory visit he conducted in Sydney, Australia, Pennycook identifies three critical moments in the teacher learner’s classroom, arising from the actions of a disruptive male student; the use of practice dialogues; and the recognition of nonstandard English in the classroom. Each of these critical moments raises larger questions of power and authority in society and provides an opportunity for critical discussion and reflection. He suggests that, “...trying to be a critical educator is more often about seeking and seizing small moments to open the door on a more critical perspective” (p. 341). Thus Pennycook’s account, too, locates praxis in the emerging critical awareness of teacher learners, and its potential for social transformation.

To similar effect, Margaret Hawkins (2004b) analyzes interactions on a listserve in a graduate teacher education class in the Midwestern U.S.A., examining how the listserve functioned to support dialogic engagement among class members, and how it mediated the construction of meanings and understandings. Hawkins claims, “...the listserve provided both access to identities and voices from which to speak, and an overt focus on the relations between language and literacy and relations of power.” (p. 106). It promoted students’ emerging awareness of critical issues, including their own status and positioning, thus enabling them to break down boundaries and re-distribute power

relations amongst themselves. For Hawkins, praxis was defined as the raising of critical awareness, but also the direct connections class members made between these issues, their social relations, and their teaching practices.

Critical Self-Reflection

In seeking to address inequities, critical language teacher educators encourage teacher learners to critically reflect on their own identities and positioning in society. Self-reflection provides a window on the relationship between the individual and the social world, highlighting both constraints on and possibilities for social change. Here we present accounts that display classroom strategies that teacher educators in diverse contexts utilized to promote self-reflection by their teacher learners.

Aneta Pavlenko (2003) demonstrates how she utilized theory to provide empowering options in a graduate language education class in the U.S.A. By encouraging critical self-reflection through linguistic autobiographies, Pavlenko realized that many teacher learners had internalized traditional discourses of native vs. non-native speakers. She therefore introduced contemporary theories of language acquisition and competency, in particular Cook's (1992, 1999) notion of multicompetence, enabling her students to re-envision themselves as legitimate users of the target language, rather than as "failed native speakers". The comments of Ikuku, a female Japanese student, illustrate the power of theory to provide a wider range of identity options for teacher learners:

Every day, I learn a new insight about English and sociocultural aspect of the language, which knowledge empowers me. For instance, I hesitated to see myself as a bilingual person until recently, and I kept thinking that my English was not good enough and ultimately I should be able to speak or write like native person until I learned the concept of multicompetency by Cook. (p. 262)

In this example, praxis can be defined as the emerging awareness (on the part of the teacher learners) of ways in which societal discourses have shaped their self-perceptions, and thus their ability to act on the world.

In an example from South Africa, Pippa Stein (2004) discusses The Literacy Archive Project, which she implemented in an undergraduate teacher education course taught to students from both historically advantaged (mostly white) as well as disadvantaged (mostly black) backgrounds. The project promoted critical self-reflection by requiring teacher learners to present multimodal representations of their own literacy histories. These evoked powerful affective responses, which served to make visible the power of privilege, and to re-distribute what she calls "students' representational resources." As Stein notes,

In classrooms into which students bring diverse representational resources that are differently valued in the school setting, one of the ways to work with this situation is to develop pedagogies that work with what students bring... and acknowledge what students have lost. (p. 50)

Praxis here is the recognition by teacher learners of power differences among cultural groups, reflections on their own positioning within these power relations, and understanding the implications of such differences for language and literacy learning and teaching.

Angel Lin (2004) describes her experience designing and teaching a critical pedagogy curriculum in a MATESOL course in Hong Kong. Her students, local teachers who have to negotiate undemocratic educational policies and struggle with identities that are defined in gendered, ageist terms, are frustrated by the inaccessibility of critical theory. Lin integrates course content with her learners' lives, and struggles to make social and critical theories meaningful and applicable. She recognizes that her learners feel powerless as teachers, and she finds ways to connect them, through critical self-reflective writing, to a broader professional community. Lin says:

I witnessed the empowering effect of words produced by teachers, themselves, as agents analyzing their own situations and voicing their own views about the oppressive system in which they are caught and in which they have, for so long, felt helpless. (p. 281)

In Lin's practice, as in Pavlenko's and Stein's, praxis means empowering teacher learners to critically reflect on their positioning within larger relationships of power, with a view to resisting oppressive social practices.

Critical Pedagogical Relations

If the goal of critical pedagogy is to empower learners, pedagogical relations between teacher educators and teacher learners must be structured on equitable terms. In the three accounts that follow, teacher educators reflect on their attempts to restructure power relations between themselves and their teacher learners, not only to model critical educational practices, but to encourage teacher learners to consider ways in which their own teaching can enhance opportunities for language learners in their classrooms.

In an example of innovative curriculum development, Graham Crookes and Al Lehner (1998) describe a language teacher education course they taught in Hawaii in which they aimed to disrupt what Freire has referred to as "the banking model of education" in favor of one in which all participants are equally responsible for designing and participating in learning. Beginning with a negotiation of the syllabus, they attempted to change the structure and dynamics of the class. Their account details the struggle to implement a critical curriculum within a traditional environment, and is, in large part, a reflection on the tensions between their positions of authority as educators and the desire to enact a participatory, dialogic pedagogy. Thus praxis entailed a critical examination of, and shift in, the structure of the curriculum and classroom.

In a dialogic reflection, Jerri Willett and Sarah Miller (2004) discuss a graduate language teacher education class in the eastern U.S.A. in which they, respectively, were professor and student. The course focused on transformational curriculum design, and supported teachers to "challenge the status quo" in a standards-based era of accountability. As in Crookes and Lehner's example above, they worked to reconceptualize and re-distribute power relations among participants. In their view, "...contradictions, tensions, misalignments, and unpredictable results provide productive possibilities for transformative practice," (p. 53), and it is through dialogic engagement across differences that learning (for all participants) occurred. For them, praxis is change in classroom practice (both their own and the teacher learners') that promotes social justice, and the focus is on understanding how course design supports such change.

The final account is that of Kelleen Toohey and Bonnie Waterstone (2004), in which they reflect on their experiences facilitating a teacher research group in Vancouver, Canada. Their challenge was to construct equitable relations with the teacher learners, who were practicing teachers. While they shared the mutual goal of expanding classroom learning opportunities for language minority students, they had very different ideas on how to reach that goal. Toohey and Waterstone provide examples of teachers collaboratively exploring their practices, but resisting facilitators' attempts to bridge into academic language. Toohey and Waterstone suggest that writing which respects both teachers' and researchers' ways of knowing makes collaborative research a powerful tool. Here, too, praxis is the pedagogical restructuring of power relations between teacher educators and teacher learners.

Insights, implications and cautions

Thus far we have argued that critical awareness, critical self-reflection, and critical pedagogical relations are central heuristics in critical language teacher education, noting, however, that there are no neat boundaries between these conceptual frames. What then might be some of the common threads across the accounts we have identified? We offer five principles for discussion and critique:

- *The situated nature of programs and practices*
One common theme is the local and specific nature of the pedagogy and content of critical language teacher education. In each case, teacher educators drew on their cultural and historical knowledge of the context and the students in order to work innovatively with teacher learners.
- *Responsiveness to learners*
Language teacher educators took into account their knowledge of their teacher learners' languages, cultures, desires and histories, and connected learning to the backgrounds and experiences students brought to the learning environment.
- *Dialogic engagement*
Language teacher educators used collaborative dialogue to construct and mediate meanings and understandings. In each case, dialogue was used to promote reflection among participants, and to link explicit critical awareness of social justice issues to educational practices.
- *Reflexivity*
Teacher educators displayed deep reflectivity on their own practices. In addition to discussing goals and pedagogies, they provided an insightful analysis of what occurred, and how they might use what they have learned from these experiences to re-design future possibilities.
- *Praxis*
Each case discussed took up the notion of praxis (although not necessarily naming it as such) by integrating theory and practice in the interests of educational and social change.

These, then, serve as examples of 'pedagogies of possibility' (Simon, 1992), offering hope that, as teacher educators, we can support change in institutional practices that will ultimately serve to offer full and equal participation in society for language learners.

There are, however, cautions associated with critical practices that call for further debate and critique. Within institutions of education, there are traditional power hierarchies that are not easily disrupted. Critical theory and pedagogy directly challenge relations of power in the classroom, advocating for equalizing these relations. As Johnston (1999) points out, however, "...teachers still retain power in the classroom ... it is more interesting and useful to work on putting this power to good use than to imagine it can be removed." (p.560). There may well be potential dangers in disrupting and critiquing relations of power in some locales. Not only may there be political sanctions for the teacher, but students who have been socialized into specific schooling practices and ideologies may resist such change. An inevitable tension arises between our belief that critical pedagogy is good and just, and our right to impose it on others. A concept that we have found helpful in negotiating this impasse is the differentiation between coercive and collaborative relations of power (Cummins, 2000; Kreisberg, 1992). We embrace the view that when power is distributed and shared, its potential for social change is enhanced.

A second critique addresses the theoretical nature of critical pedagogy and its perceived impracticality. Gore (1992) discusses the difficulties for teachers engaging in critical work, given few guidelines or resources, and little time for major adaptation of curriculum and classroom processes. In addition, as education in many contexts is becoming more standards-based, and testing proliferates, critical practitioners must juggle commitments to social justice while ensuring that their students can jump existing hurdles to succeed in the educational arena.

Given that critical practice is situated, responsive, and contextual, it is clear that the pursuit of a one-size-fits-all model of critical language teacher education is inadequate (Kumaramadivelu, 2005; Norton, 2005). However, the very absence of prescriptive models encourages the language teacher educator to reflect on the possibilities and limitations of any given context, and creatively seek enhanced opportunities for language learners through educational and social change. This then, is the promise a critical approach holds: to contribute to the shaping of a social world in which all people, regardless of language, ethnicity, color or class, have equal voices, access, and possibilities.

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