Dialogue, praxis, and humanizing pedagogy as principles of practice in second language education.

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Language and the human spirit are inextricably intertwined. We interpret the world through language. We express ourselves through language. Language is powerful. Language can bring us together or set us apart. It can be used to include -- to bridge barriers between cultures, religions, and worldviews -- at the same time as it can be used to exclude by inflaming xenophobia and racism. Language can establish community and solidarity at the same time as it can be used to erect boundaries and divide communities. More often than not, when we turn on the TV, we see language used to hide reality, to deceive, to spin, to distract, to disempower, to reinforce us-versus-them-conceptions of humanity. Language is no longer innocent. We can no longer conceptualize language as some kind of neutral code that can be taught in classrooms in splendid isolation from its intersection with issues of power, identity, and spirituality. (Cummins, 2003a, ¶ 2)

Becoming Un-comfortable

It has now been more than fifteen years since I began working with English language learners (ELLs) and their families in public schools. The quote above comes from Jim Cummins’ keynote address to the TESOL Convention in Salt Lake City in 2002 and marks a pivotal moment in my career. I had survived the difficult first few years of teaching and, before the address at least, I had settled into a confident and comfortable rhythm as a language educator. Cummins’ address was the first time I encountered explicit public attention being given to the broader social, emotional, and political issues in ESL education. While I was not unaware of these issues, my experience as a teacher in public schools had been that most efforts were narrowly focused on making sure that ELLs achieved “full” English proficiency as quickly as possible, often with little regard for the considerable emotional and educational costs endured by students and their families. As long as they learned English and progressed towards state determined academic benchmarks, other issues appeared to be largely irrelevant.

Aside from calling attention to important sociocultural issues, Cummins’ address signals the moment I began to develop in my teaching what Lilia Bartolomé calls “political and ideological clarity” (Bartolomé & Balderrama, 2001, p. 48), an understanding of the connections between personal and political contexts. Having worked as a human rights observer in
Guatemala and a community organizer among migrant farm workers in the US, I was acutely aware of how imperialist economic and foreign policy directions contributed to oppressive and inequitable conditions along racial, class, and ethnic lines. These were formative experiences that shaped my thinking towards advocacy and activism before I became a teacher. Until hearing Cummins’ address, I had never considered school as a site in the public sphere appropriate for activism.

In his address, Cummins spoke not only of the power of language but also of the potential and possibilities of a pedagogy that recognizes connections between language, knowledge, and power, a pedagogy that is unabashedly political and committed to changing unjust structures in education. He suggested that “The choices we make with respect to how we teach language and literacy mirror our image of the society into which our students will graduate and the contributions we believe they can make to that society” (2003a, ¶ 4). As I reflected on this, I was no longer so comfortable with my efforts as a teacher, and I recognized my responsibility to develop a more critical and engaged pedagogy that transcended a mechanical view of language as a tool for communication and education. The more I examined my practice, the more I realized the political nature and the transformative potential of both language and education.

These narratives reflect the complex ways that theory and experience have collided and entangled themselves throughout my journey as a critical language educator.

As one of society’s most pervasive and influential cultural institutions, schools are uniquely positioned to inspire and empower young citizens towards thoughtful participation in society, in the making and remaking of democracy. Critical educator Paulo Freire spoke of the political nature of schooling and the potential of a critical and engaged pedagogy in realizing schools as democratic public spheres. In his introduction to Giroux’s Teachers as Intellectuals
Freire asserted “schools are public places where students learn the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in an authentic democracy” (p. xxxiii). According to Freire, this involves much more than understanding democratic principles like equality, liberty, and popular participation. Creating an engaged citizenry for democratic participation requires that schools encourage students to critically assess their position in the world and to take informed action to change it for the better, what Freire and Macedo referred to as “reading the word and the world” (1987). This vision of schools as sites of public engagement and action has never been more urgent in the United States, as the politics of “education reform” continue to position public schools and teachers as responsible for the ills of society. These efforts conspire to squash engaged and democratic work in schools where students tackle real-world problems of inequality and injustice. While I would argue that this poses a significant threat to the education of all students in US public schools, in this article I focus my gaze on the fastest growing segment of the US public school population: English language learners.

This article discusses the role of critical pedagogy in educating English language learners (ELLs) and emphasizes its potential for simultaneously promoting language learning and positive social change. In an effort to represent the recursive and dialectical interaction between theory and experience, I use the tools of autoethnography (CHANG; VASCONCELOS) to highlight the trajectory of my understanding of key concepts of critical pedagogy in my development as a critical language educator.

In what Freire termed the “banking model” of education (1993), technocratic approaches reduce teaching to the transmission of predetermined facts and information to passive students. This approach to education objectifies both teachers and students and narrowly defines teaching and learning in scientific and mechanical terms (Apple, 2004; Leistyna, Woodrum, & Sherblom,
1996). Critical pedagogy, on the other hand, engages learners’ lived experiences while seeking to interrogate the relationship among knowledge, authority, and power in order to transform inequitable, undemocratic, or oppressive institutions and social realities (Giroux, 1994). It is this emphasis on action and social change that sets critical pedagogy apart from traditional educational models. A critical pedagogy invites students and teachers to integrate local social and political concerns into their classroom community, asking probing questions like who benefits, who is left out, and why not instead of what page. In their narrative analysis of a 5th grade classroom in Chicago, Schultz and Oyler (2006) offer an excellent example of how engaged problem-posing education can. In this way, critical pedagogy reflects an opportunity to move ELL education beyond a narrow focus on prescriptive teaching and learning by pursuing a more situated understanding of its role in promoting critical and active democratic participation.

Critical pedagogy represents an interdisciplinary project that draws from many theoretical perspectives. Critical educational theories of curriculum (Apple, 2004) and critical social theories (Horkheimer, 1975) constitute earlier influences, while cultural studies (Giroux & McLaren, 1994) represents a more recent turn. However, most scholars locate its origins in Freire’s work, specifically the publication of his foundational text Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1993). Freire’s thinking was influenced by an unlikely blend of Hegelian dialectics, Marxist materialism, and Christian liberation theology. While Freire is most widely recognized for his literacy work with rural adults in Brazil, his progressive scholarship continued to develop throughout his life as a result of his work throughout the world. He spent years in Chile, Africa, and Switzerland, engaged in projects ranging from agrarian reform to assisting the World Council of Churches. In the United States, Freire was a frequent collaborator with Myles Horton, founder of The Highlander Folk School, which played a significant role in the Civil Rights
Movement and the development of participatory education in the US (see Horton, Freire, Bell, Gaventa, & Peters, 1990 for a full account of their collaborations).

Freire’s (1993) educational philosophy emphasizes the centrality of examining connections between political, economic, and cultural norms and the lived realities in local schools and communities. He asserted that without critically examining local contexts, individuals “remain unaware of the causes of their condition, [and] they fatalistically accept their exploitation” (p. 46). Through a process of conscientização, or consciousness raising, however, individuals begin to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of their reality. In this way conscientização represents a more comprehensive understanding of freedom, as not simply freedom from (oppression, violence, poverty, linguistic discrimination, etc.), but also as a way toward a more positive social reality, or freedom to. Critical pedagogy is thus action-oriented; in addition to seeking freedom from oppressive realities, it emphasizes the need to create just and equitable relations in personal and social experiences.

Critical Perspectives on Language Education

In recent years, language education scholars have begun to explore critical approaches to language pedagogy and research. Given the importance of historical, sociocultural, and political contexts in language learning, these perspectives challenge the traditional cognitive and positivistic stronghold that has dominated research and practice in second language education. Instead, they affirm Cummins’ stance in the epigraph that language teaching and learning cannot be pursued as an isolated endeavor, separated from the sociocultural and political realities of local contexts. Rather, this work situates language teaching and learning within the larger project of education as the practice of freedom, a liberatory and humanizing experience that allows
students and teachers to connect learning to their lives in meaningful ways (Freire, 1993; hooks, 1994). Examples of this critical scholarship in second language education have expanded traditional notions of language learner identity (Norton, 1995), articulated visions for multilingual educational models (Garcia, Skutnabb-Kangas, & Torres-Guzman, 2004), and suggested Freirian perspectives of dialogue as a framework for educating ELLs (Wong, 2006).

While the specific foci of critical language studies vary, they do however, share a common understanding of the political nature of language teaching and learning. According to Norton & Toohey (2004), critical pedagogies understand language as 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” (p. 1). In a special issue of TESOL Quarterly devoted to critical perspectives, Pennycook (1999) emphasized the political nature of TESOL, asserting that critical TESOL educators “must see pedagogy as a question of cultural politics; and the focus of politics must be accountable to broader political and ethical visions that put inequality, oppression, and compassion to the fore” (p. 334). While suggesting this common ideological frame of challenging oppression and inequality, Pennycook explicitly rejects the notion of critical language pedagogies as adopting a static body of knowledge or common set of practices. Instead, he points to the complex and dynamic sociocultural and political relationships at play in teaching and learning and advocates a responsive and adaptive approach that recognizes the constant state of flux in local contexts. Pennycook (2001) presents a comprehensive view of critical language pedagogies as “applied linguistics with an attitude” (p. 164), further implicating the political nature of knowledge, texts, and pedagogy, as well as language itself.
Morgan (2002, 2004) suggested the need for developing a critical pedagogy with ELLs as a way of preparing them for more than reading the words or the lines of their new language, but rather the world (culture) and between the lines. This is sage advice if we agree with Cummins’ assessment in the epigraph regarding the proliferation of language as a tool for deception and distraction in modern media outlets. To teach language isolated from these political realities because it involves complex or sensitive topics and “difficult” language, constitutes benevolent discrimination (Nieto, 1999) and puts ELLs at a significant disadvantage. In a community-based ESL context, Morgan (2004) documented how connecting the lesson content (referendum, national identity, politics, economy, immigration, etc.) back to learners’ identities and experiences facilitated language learning as well as engagement with local political concerns. He used current political and cultural circumstances (Quebec national referendum and concerns of national identity and impact of immigration) as a means of connecting language learning to relevant social realities. Learners were able to relate their language learning experiences to meaningful social and political realities in their local contexts.

Luke (2004) and Morgan (2004) both write of the unique opportunity for critical pedagogy in TESOL contexts. Luke suggests that the historical reality of colonization experienced by a majority of ELLs, the “bodily experience of having been the object of power” (p. 26) through cultural, linguistic, and/or economic marginalization may facilitate a critical educational project. He contends that these historical realities distinguish ELLs from mainstream learners in significant ways that can potentially interrupt the reproductive goals of mainstream education, resulting in a moment of disruption or mismatch that creates the potential for critique and resistance. In support of this position, Morgan (2004) adds that “given the prior development of metalanguage, ESL students are favorably predisposed—in contrast to monolingual
students—toward making abstractions and generalizations that link the microstructures of texts to the discursive macrostructures of society” (p. 173).

I also include here, the work of Osborn (2006) and Guilherme (2002), who write more broadly about the role of critical pedagogy in foreign language education overall, but contribute unique perspectives on the rift between ESL and foreign language education. Osborn (2006) wrote of the need to reconceptualize second language education with an emphasis on social justice. Part of this process, he argued, involves dissolving the arbitrary rift between ESL and foreign-language education in favor of a “unified discipline referred to as world language education…that becomes more reflective of the diversity in languages found in the United States” (p. 158). In a similar vein, Guilherme (2002) stressed the need for an interdisciplinary approach to language education and discussed the role of critical pedagogy in developing critical cultural awareness as a necessary goal (pp. 39-40). This requires examining the combined influences of culture, politics, and power as well as recognizing the creative and generative potential that emerges from dialogue, empowerment, and dissent.

In light of conservative trends in education, it is encouraging to be able to remark that the literature on critical pedagogies in language education is too vast to cover here. I now focus my gaze on the role of dialogue, praxis, and humanizing pedagogy in educating ELLs. It is vital to note that these three concepts, while discussed each in turn, should not be viewed as distinct and separate elements of a critical pedagogy. Rather, it is perhaps more fitting to consider them from an ecological perspective, as interconnected elements constantly interacting in complex and creative ways, each contributing to the pursuit of a more just organization of teaching and learning. Individually, they may represent specific methods, approaches, or perspectives; in their interaction, however, their shape is altered and their impact is enhanced.
Dialogue

As the foundation of Freire’s emancipatory pedagogy, dialogic teaching has almost become synonymous with critical pedagogies. Not to be confused with conversation or discussion, dialogue is politically engaged, informed by both reflection and action, and committed to transforming oppressive relations in education. As such, dialogue constitutes a critical process that supports the emancipatory goals of critical pedagogy. It involves shared inquiry and meaning making and stands in stark contrast to authoritarian banking that eschews dialogue for one-way transmission of knowledge from teachers to students. Education as transmission maintains rigid boundaries between teacher/student, knowledge producer/consumer and mirrors other oppressive relations in society. Engaged dialogic education involves the “open exchange of ideas…It is joyous, serious, and challenging” (Guilherme, 2002, p. 48) and allows learners to create and re-create new understandings out of their interactions with others and in relation to the world. It is through dialogue and conscientização, Freire argued, that individuals name their world, and in doing so, begin to transform it (1993, p. 69). In what ways then, can dialogue support critical, transformative learning for ELLs and their teachers?

Of primary importance for dialogue is a sense of mutual respect and trust among the participants. For teachers of ELLs, this requires confronting deficit perspectives that regard linguistic and cultural differences as liabilities (Bartolomé, 1996; Cummins, 2003b; Nieto, 1999). Bartolomé contends that these perspectives are “deeply ingrained in the ethos of our most prominent institutions, especially schools” (1996, p. 238) and continue to place blame for academic failure on students’ cultural and linguistic differences. In order to transcend deficit perspectives, teachers must examine their own biases and ideological stances and begin to shift from a static position of teacher to the dynamic role of “an educator who experiences the act of
knowing together with his students” (Freire, 1985, p. 55). Teachers must work *with* students to establish learning communities that support and nurture all learners to participate in the dialogue when they are moved to do so. Unfortunately, most ELLs have not experienced such dynamic and responsive classrooms. Instead, as immigrants and ethnic and linguistic minorities, they have consistently been marginalized in classrooms as well as in the broader society.

In her ethnography of ELLs in a first-grade classroom, Toohey (1998) documented how common classroom practices contribute to “community stratification…and lead to the exclusion of some students from certain activities, practices, identities, and affiliations” (p. 80). Three patterns of behavior are worth noting here. Students were constantly expected to: sit at their own desks (as opposed to collaborating and working with pairs or groups); use their own materials and not to share crayons, scissors, etc.; and to do their own work and use their own words (as opposed to dialoguing with others). Emphasis was placed on individualism, ownership, and independence of thought. While these practices do not appear as necessarily egregious or even uncommon, taken together it is clear how over time they reinforce a classroom of individuals instead of a community of learners. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine such classrooms engaging in dialogue or promoting collaborative learning communities.

Wong (2006) asserts that the goal of a dialogic pedagogy is to “support the inclusion of voices of those who have traditionally been excluded in academic discourse” (p. 35). A dialogic classroom then would not ignore or deny the social, political, or economic realities facing ELLs. In contrast, according to Wong (2006), in a dialogic classroom students’ lived experiences and realities would be welcomed and explored. Although discussions may vary depending on students’ age levels, the goal is to co-create a learning environment where learners are comfortable and, indeed encouraged, to examine issues of power, knowledge construction,
curriculum, and social positioning in society. Questions regarding immigration, navigating bicultural identities, and the ways in which language and culture are represented in schools and the media all constitute potential topics for dialogical classrooms with ELLs.

Discussing the role of dialogic teaching in ESL settings, Benesch (1999) challenged the position that overburdened teachers must choose between implementing rigorous academic content and teaching for equity and social justice. She stated,

A dialogic approach…does not choose between immediate needs and the development of social awareness, believing that they can and should be taught simultaneously. A critical teacher responds to the demands of content courses while encouraging students to question academic life and society. (p. 579)

For all its transformative potential, dialogue must not be misunderstood as a mere method or technique for promoting discussion among learners. When this is the case, isolated individual experiences dominate, and dialogue devolves into conversation or “idle chatter”. Too frequently though, educators revel in this achievement of incorporating multiple voices and personal experiences in the classroom without connecting these experiences to the object of their collective inquiry or examining them in relation to broader social realities. This fails to understand that dialogue constitutes both a process of learning and a way of knowing, what Freire and Macedo refer to as “an epistemological relationship” (1996, p. 202). Further, without a sustained connection to the object of inquiry, dialogue “is no longer understood within a social praxis” (Freire & Macedo, 1996, p. 203) and loses its transformative potential.

Praxis, Activism, or Verbalism?

In an account of her development as a critical ESL educator, Dorta-Duque de Reyes (1995) reflected on her evolving understanding of praxis. She eloquently captured the
complexity involved, describing it as recursive and iterative, “a continuous action of love, service, and reflection; love, service, and reflection” (p. 193). She understood that to live out this praxis in her classroom would require engaging in critical analysis of her current practices. She began a process of questioning and problem-posing, demanding visual and sensory evidence for what would constitute a critical stance in her first-grade classroom. She asked herself, “what might [the] classroom context look like, sound like, and feel like from my students’ perspectives” (p. 185) if she encouraged shared decision-making, questioning authority, and other critical approaches. These questions revealed gaps between her critical and democratic intentions and the realities she recognized in her classroom. As a result, this process of reflection informed the initial changes Dorta-Duque de Reyes made in her classroom and continued to support her journey as an ever-evolving critical ESL educator. She concluded that “to be engaged in a spiral of action, where reflection and service are centered in love, is a constant inner struggle, but a most joyous and rewarding condition” (p. 195). This captures the dual goals of critique and hope of critical pedagogy.

Freire (1993) wrote simply that praxis is “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 33). A more nuanced investigation reveals the dialectical relationship among these constituent parts, reflection and action. Freire added, without action, we are left with verbalism, empty conversation incapable of recognizing political connections between self and broader contexts. Without reflection, we have only activism, action for action’s sake (p. 69). Neither of these alone can transform the world. My first years as an ESL teacher reflect the well intentioned but disconnected halves of praxis. Influenced by my work as a human rights observer in Guatemala, I found it natural to extend my role beyond the classroom and became involved in advocating for my students and their families. However, with hindsight, it is clear that this
involvement was often paternalistic activism, as I tended to approach this work as service for my students and their families, and rarely, if ever, with them. Dialogue was absent, and because I failed to engage in any critical reflection, there were gross ethnocentric assumptions on my part as to the best approaches for addressing the social and economic hardships they were facing. My teaching represented the other half, verbalism. As mentioned earlier, I lacked the political and ideological clarity (Bartolomé & Balderrama, 2001) necessary to recognize and challenge the irrelevant curricula and entrenched tracking system we inflicted upon ELLs. As a result, “banking” ensued, and I failed to recognize my own collusion in an educational paradigm that was swollen with the rhetoric of “academic achievement” and “cultural diversity” but failed to offer any substantive or lasting framework for achieving either.

To avoid the dangers of verbalism and activism, teachers working with culturally and linguistically diverse students must engage in critical self-reflection on their practice. As illustrated by Dorta-Duque de Reyes (1995), any meaningful self-evaluation reveals some distance between practice and intent. For critical educators though, these gaps between our understanding and practice become the catalyst for personal and professional growth and generate the force that moves the praxis cycle from reflection back to action. In this way, praxis represents a dynamic and recursive process that involves both inward reflection and outward action, always in a relational analysis to broader social and political structures (Apple, 1996). As a result, personal and professional growth also stimulates collective understanding and action. In writing of the possibilities of a critical and humanizing pedagogy, bell hooks (1994) contributes to our understanding of praxis as an individual and collective undertaking. For her, praxis is at once reflective and participatory; it is “that historical moment when one begins to think critically about the self and identity in relation to one’s political circumstance” (p. 47). Given current
social realities surrounding immigration and language policy, it is vital for educators of ELLs to think critically about the connections between individual politics and social policy.

Olivos and Quintana de Valladolid (2005) wrote that amidst a continuing wave of conservative educational reforms, critical bilingual educators must engage in reflective praxis. They argue that the divisive anti-immigrant, anti-bilingual “ propositions” in California (187 aimed at barring all social services to undocumented immigrants; 209 to end affirmative action; and 227 to end bilingual education), confirm a politics of fear that fuels social and economic tensions and contributes to the inequitable provision of educational opportunities for students of color. In order to confront these trends critical language educators need to engage and reclaim the emancipatory goals of bilingual education that emerged from the Chicano activism movements of the 1960’s (Donato, 1997). This realignment is significant, as it liberates ELL education from technocratic oriented goals of standards-based academic achievement and relocates it within the larger project of education as the practice of freedom. Engaged in the praxis of critical reflection educators become “critically minded intellectuals” (Giroux, 1988) capable of recognizing and confronting unjust social and educational policies.

Facilitating Dialogue and Praxis: Steps Toward a Humanizing Pedagogy

Many critical scholars assert that unequal power relations between dominant and minority cultural groups in society are represented and reproduced in schools (Bartolomé, 1996; Cummins, 1996, 2000; Giroux, 1988; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007; Shor, 1996). For ELLs, this has historically resulted in cultural marginalization, linguistic assimilation, and academic underachievement. According to Bartolomé and Balderrama (2001), in order to transform these unequal power relations and realize a humanizing pedagogy, teachers must develop political and ideological clarity. For educators, political clarity refers to a process “by which individuals come
to understand better the possible linkages between macro-level political, economic, and social variables and subordinated groups’ academic performance at the micro-level classroom” (p. 48). Ideological clarity requires that teachers investigate the differences between their own explanations for social, economic, and academic inequities between dominant and minority students “with those propagated by the dominant society” (p. 48).

Bartolomé (1996) described a humanizing pedagogy as one that “values students’ background knowledge, culture, life experiences, and creates learning contexts where power is shared by students and teachers” (p. 248). Bartolomé and Balderrama (2001) further developed this notion, adding that a humanizing pedagogy is “driven by a political and ideological quest for greater social justice” (p. 52). This is contrasted with well-intentioned teachers who approach educating ELLs with supportive and nurturing practices but lack political and ideological clarity. While such teachers may recognize the subordinate status of their ELLs, without consciously locating and critiquing their assumptions and practices, they are limited in their efforts to avoid reproducing unequal power relations in their own classrooms and contribute to meaningful change.

Cummins (1996, 2000) provided a helpful framework for understanding power as necessary for implementing a humanizing pedagogy. Drawing on Poplin and Weeres’ (1992) ethnography of four California schools, Cummins asserted that “human relationships are at the heart of schooling” (1996, p. 1) and power is implicated in those relationships. Concerned with academic, social, and economic inequities between native-English speakers and ELLs, Cummins argued that schooling relationships need to be understood as reflections of the dominant prevailing attitudes in the wider society. He asserted that the dominant paradigm is characterized by “coercive relations of power” and calls educators to challenge this power structure and instead
enact what he terms “collaborative relations of power” (1996, p. 44) that operate on the assumption that power is generated through meaningful interpersonal relationships. Taken from this perspective, ELLs’ cultural and linguistic differences are recognized as assets, and power is no longer a commodity of fixed quantity, wielded in hierarchical fashion from teacher upon student. Rather, power is conceptualized as a renewable resource that is created as the result of a schooling experience that acknowledges and validates the cultural and historical realities of all learners (p. 44). Taking this approach, teachers can generate movement away from deficit perspectives that marginalize and blame ELLs towards more humanizing approaches that seek to empower and validate them.

A critical humanizing pedagogy for ELLs represents an opportunity to challenge institutional arrangements that maintain divisions between dominant and non-dominant students and perpetuate deficit perspectives of difference. In order to practice an engaged and humanizing pedagogy that encourages dialogue, teachers must reconceptualize their relationships with students and question the traditional teacher/student hierarchy. This requires critical self-reflection aimed at understanding and interrogating individual biases and ideological assumptions, as well as reconsidering positions on difference, power, and participation. As teachers engage in this process, they may begin to approach teaching and learning from a more humanizing stance, recognizing that all learners have knowledge to contribute and all voices have a place in the classroom. More importantly perhaps, this process requires that teachers view themselves as active learners within the classroom community as well. hooks (1994) considered this paramount for engaged critical pedagogies, indicating that teachers must participate and be willing to be vulnerable if we are to make education the practice of freedom (p. 21). To assume that critical pedagogy is about empowering only students reifies the authoritarian teacher/student
hierarchy. A humanizing critical pedagogy involves both teachers and students in a process of sharing personal experiences and constructing meaningful knowledge together.

Critiques of Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy has been critiqued from a number of different perspectives. Challenging critical pedagogy’s emphasis on cultural production, Hirsch (1987, 1999) suggested that schools should ignore their multilingual and multicultural realities and instead play a role of cultural transmission. This approach involves the delivery of an identified and approved core body of knowledge that all students need to be successful in society. The cultural transmission model depicts an accurate blueprint for “banking” models of education. Other conservatives like Chavez (1991, 2006) and Schelsinger (1992) support Hirsch’s call for a more homogenized curriculum and citizenry, citing bilingual practices as particularly problematic. They claim that critical pedagogy and other progressive models of education promote among minorities a “cult of ethnicity” (Schlesinger, 1992, p. 20) that significantly hinders education’s goal of creating national unity. Schlesinger further problematized approaches that foster multicultural and multilingual awareness, arguing “Bilingualism shuts doors. It nourishes self-ghettoization…and dooms people to second class citizenship… Institutionalized bilingualism remains another source of fragmentation of America” (p. 108). The ways in which school and broader social and governmental policy mirror one another are evident as well. In a recent testimony to congress regarding the issue of establishing bilingual ballots, Chavez argued that such practices promote the “balkanization of our country” (Chavez, 2006, p. 3) and are unnecessary because most of the nation’s voting citizens speak English.

These critiques have significant implications for implementing critical pedagogy with ELLs. While there is not sufficient space to confront these critiques at length, a few responses
are necessary. Perhaps most striking is that such critiques suggest an increasingly conservative political climate in education, leaving little ground for critical educators to stand on or build coalitions for collective change. The “Unz initiatives” to dismantle bilingual education and the relentless emphasis on standardization and accountability (e.g. NCLB, 2001) are just of few of the many recent examples. The critiques of conservatives like Hirsch, Schlesinger, and Chavez are plagued by what Macedo (1996) referred to as social and historical amnesia. In promoting homogenized approaches to cultural literacy, curriculum, and language policy, they conveniently ignore the historical and multicultural realities of non-dominant students. They choose not to remember the nation’s significant history with immigration, bilingual education, or even recent immigrants’ contributions to the United States’ military and economic supremacy throughout the globe. Instead they seek to narrowly define what it means to be “American” based on dominant culture norms of White native-English speakers. Critical educators must be prepared to confront such approaches as oppressive and divisive.

In response, critical pedagogues contend that critical pedagogy must not be thought of as a monolithic understanding of theory or practice. Rather it is an ever-evolving movement that takes different forms that are context specific (Giroux, 1994). Leistyna, Woodrum, and Sherblom (1996) speak of the evolving nature of critical pedagogy, stating, “as new questions evolve out of social controversies, so does the call for new and more inclusive theoretical and practical responses” (p. 6). Freire as well, refused to ascribe a particular set of methods per se, but rather challenged critical educators to focus on the realities of students’ lives and to construct learning experiences that encourage connections between individual and social realities.

Of all the critiques levied against critical pedagogy, those suggesting the need to reexamine the nature of dialogue present the most significant opportunity for teachers working
with ELLs. Arguing from a postmodernist and poststructualist perspective, Burbules (2000, 2005) contended that critical pedagogues’ dyadic understanding of power relations (oppressor/oppressed) ultimately limits the potential of dialogue. He suggested a more fluid understanding is needed to represent a complex and multifaceted conception of differences that extends “beyond dyadic choices of either/or” (2005, p. 205). In this sense then, Burbules is suggesting that dialogue is rarely a simple two-way endeavor; it also involves internal tension and conflict. Critical educators need to recognize complex cultural, historical, and linguistic realities of ELLs in US public schools and understand that dialogue is not a method, or panacea. While Freire is clear that dialogue must both be politically engaged and relevant to individual lives, many educators “adopt” dialogue as a method and lack a comprehensive awareness of dialogue as a way of knowing (Freire, 1993; Freire and Macedo, 1996). Burbules’ suggestion to cross-examine dialogue and continually approach it with deliberation aligns with critical pedagogy’s emphasis on self-analysis and critique. Indeed, without critical analysis, adopted practices, critical or not, simply become reified and oppressive approaches to education.

Witness to Language Learning as Personal and Social Transformation

In these concluding reflections I find it fitting to revisit Cummins’ words that suggest the centrality of language to all our human endeavors. I turn to an experience that significantly impacted my decision to become a language educator and documents the powerful ways in which dialogue, praxis, and a humanizing stance facilitate a critical liberatory project.

My career as a language educator began in the improbable outdoor classroom of the Ixcan Jungle in Guatemala. Serving as a human rights observer during the last year of Guatemala’s civil war, I suddenly found myself in the role of Spanish teacher. My home during this time was Copala, a recently formed refugee community comprised of three indigenous
groups who spoke three distinct Mayan languages: Mam, Kaqchikel, and Q'anjob'al. Due to linguistic differences, people mostly kept to themselves and the few other families that shared their native tongue. Despite the lack of a common language, the civil war had inflicted upon everyone the common experiences of loss, grief, suffering, and struggle.

The Spanish language sessions were mostly attended by women and began as informal gatherings focused on practicing simple Spanish phrases. As we became more comfortable as a group, our sessions progressed to more elaborate presentations using drama and music to facilitate language learning and involve the community. My agendas and content for the lessons soon gave way to the more relevant concerns in their lives. According to Freire, this is to be expected in a dialogical model. He wrote, “The starting point for organizing the program content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people” (1993, p. 76). Through dialogue, the content was discovered. Women began to use language to name their experiences from the war and explore their grief with the group. At times this was overwhelming, as individuals recounted graphic and explicit violent events carried out against loved ones and themselves. Other moments inspired tender acts of love, requiring no spoken language at all. Witnessing the social and emotional transformations that took place left an indelible mark on me. Throughout, the women embodied deep mutual trust, humility, and love for one another, elements Freire identified as necessary for true dialogue (1993). In doing so, they were no longer silenced and isolated individuals. On the contrary, they began to recognize the strength of solidarity, engaging in the praxis of speaking their true words and transforming their worlds (p. 69). According to Freire, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which people achieve significance as human beings. As the women engaged in this praxis,
naming their world and their oppressors, they began to confront fear and pain, envisioning positive alternatives and becoming more fully human for the first time in many years.

I do not pretend to present this experience as a simple, linear process. To be sure, it was awkward, slow, and at times wrought with conflict. Participation in the dialogue fluctuated as language proficiency and personality mediated involvement in the process. My privileged position of Spanish speaker and US passport holder was not lost on anyone and at times solidified my positionality as an outsider. However, what stands out is that, even in these challenging conditions, a pedagogy committed to dialogue and imbued with a mutual respect among learners facilitated a process of critical awareness and social change. The power of language and dialogue to heal, to ease, and ultimately to build up one’s sense of worth and identity played itself out over the course of my time in Guatemala. Our “language group” continued to meet, but its purpose evolved to reflect the issues that concerned the women. The group turned its focus onto social projects like community gardens, grief and support groups, and dramatic re-enactments to pay respect to their shared history of violence, loss, and perseverance. Whereas the initial absence of a common language perpetuated a community fractured along its linguistic borders, commitment to a dialogic and humanizing learning experience allowed the community to begin to coalesce. Through dialogue and humanizing practices that affirmed and validated their individual experiences, they created space for a thriving, collaborative community that transcended linguistic and cultural differences and nurtured individual and collective development. This experience exemplifies the entangled and recursive ways that dialogue, praxis, and humanizing approaches combine to create empowering and transformative educational experiences.
As I reflect back on my time in Guatemala, I am moved in many ways. While I mostly recall this time with fondness, I am also plagued by my inability to draw on these powerful experiences during my first years as a public school teacher. Somehow the connection escaped me. The pressure and rigorous enforcement of implementing a standardized curriculum, preparing for high-stakes testing, and developing English as quickly as possible rendered me blind and obedient (for a few years anyway) to the reproductive and assimilationist demands of the system. While the setting and conditions in Guatemala involved direct and physical oppression, the lessons learned are relevant to the schooling contexts for ELLs in United States public schools. Social and economic marginalization, cultural and linguistic isolation, and forced assimilation are daily realities for many ELLs and their families. As educators we have the opportunity within our schools and communities to choose to reproduce or to challenge practices and structures that marginalize and oppress. It has been my experience that authentic and sustained efforts to challenge these structures and practices often results in creative and empowering experiences for those involved. Dialogue and praxis have proven to be indispensable constructs in facilitating such humanizing efforts.
References


