A Critical Review of *Critical Pedagogies and Language Learning*

Nichole M. Oberheu

Colorado State University
Abstract

Critical pedagogy is a multifarious set of theoretical quandaries; however, all practitioners see critical pedagogy as the nexus of social justice and education. The merits of critical pedagogy are explored through a critique of the volume, *Critical Pedagogies and Language Learning*, edited by Bonny Norton and Kelleen Toohey. Selected chapters from the text are discussed and analyzed.

*Keywords*: critical pedagogy, critical multiculturalism, culture, identity
A Critical Review of *Critical Pedagogies and Language Learning*

TESOL (Teachers of English to speakers of other languages) professionals who advocate critical pedagogy seek the integration of social justice and language learning. Under critical pedagogy, language is conceptualized 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” (Norton & Toohey, 2004, p. 1). Critical pedagogies in ESL/EFL (English as a second/foreign language) are part of a considerable body of research in the field of education that is aimed at investigating not only the social, political and economic disparities that exist, but also the way in which ideological constructs within pedagogical practices sustain these disparities. *Critical Pedagogies and Language Learning*, edited by Bonny Norton and Kelleen Toohey, explore the complex role that critical pedagogy plays in the language classroom. Furthermore, they demonstrate the discursive and multifarious manifestations of the critical. Critical pedagogy is not a homogeneous set of world-views; rather, it is situated within particular localities that have their own unique set of problems and solutions. In this way it is difficult to generalize from the research and methodologies presented in this volume.

The anthology is divided into four sections, each containing four chapters. The sections are as follows: “Reconceptualizing Second Language Education,” “Challenging Identities,” “Researching Critical Strategies,” and “Educating Teachers for Change.” While the sections serve to delineate different areas of critical pedagogy in language learning, the chapters are intertwined. Norton and Toohey (2004, p. 11) describe several overarching themes to the text that include, “seeking critical classroom practices, creating
and adapting materials for critical classroom practices, creating and adapting materials for critical pedagogies, exploring diverse representations of knowledge and exploring critical research practices.” These themes illuminate the precarious nature of the critical as it is both practiced in the classroom and formulated in theory. Through these themes and the prose contained in *Critical Pedagogies and Language Learning* the reader can only be sure of one thing—the critical in critical pedagogy is a constant site of negotiation.

**Section One: “Reconceptualizing Second Language Education”**

“Reconceptualizing Second Language Education” focuses on the critical in diverse ESL/EFL contexts by examining race, gender, pedagogy and assessment. Alan Luke's “Two takes on the critical” explains ambiguous notion of critical in education, the reasons why the critical should be established in language learning, and posits a possible method for implementation. The critical has a heterogeneous political agenda ranging from neoliberal ideologies aimed at elevating the individual, to radical deconstructions of hegemonic narratives. In education the critical used to stand solely for critical thinking, but now it encompasses a variety of different constructs (Luke, 2004). Luke, in explanation of his own view of the critical, states that the critical can be thought of in two ways: “as an intellectual, deconstructive, textual, and cognitive analytic task and as a form of embodied political anger, alienation, and alterity” (2004, p. 26). These notions of the critical are embedded in the controversial nature of TESOL itself. These ideas are not exclusively held by Luke, but encompass questions raised by an increasingly abundant number of TESOL researchers and practitioners. They include the colonial and religious foundations of the field, and the ideological connotations associated with globalization and the spread of English. These individuals argue that TESOL, whether consciously or
unconsciously, continue to reproduce power, patriarchy, and cultural stereotypes (Luke, 2004).

Luke (2004) argues that to practice his version of the critical, TESOL professionals need to position themselves as the Other, by what he calls epistemological Othering and the doubling of the self. To do this one must move outside of their primary discourse to, as the ethnographic axiom says, “make the familiar strange” (Luke, 2004, p. 27). In doing so, one can access multiple discourses, therefore laying the groundwork for the critical. While I agree that a degree of cultural relativity is beneficial to dissolve barriers, I do not necessarily agree with the language Luke (2004) uses to describe this concept. While the “doubling of the self” may be appropriate to describe the hybridic quality of identity in diasporic populations, it becomes problematic when endeavored as conscious activity for white, native-English speaking teachers (Bhabha, 1994). It recreates the essentializing Western binaries of the Self and the Other, and negates the potential for understanding the multiplicitous and fluid nature of culture (Said, 1978). Rather than using dualistic language to describe his approach of the critical, Luke (2004) should expand on James Paul Gee's multiple discourses to more accurately describe the exercise of interrogating one's own epistemological views and exploring those of others. Despite this semantic critique, Luke (2004) does make the powerful suggestion that TESOL professionals should be constantly and critically engaged in self-reflection; he drives the importance of awareness to the foreground of critical pedagogy and in doing so asserts the need to go beyond the status quo of English language teaching and learning.

Ryuko Kubota, in the chapter titled “Critical multiculturalism and second language education,” dismantles the polarization of the Self versus the Other by
demonstrating the danger of multiculturalism and calls for the implementation of critical multiculturalism in the classroom. She argues that liberal multiculturalism has become a mere “token social protocol” that superficially constructs culture and creates the practice of cultural tourism (Kubota, 2004, p. 35). Through cultural tourism the “culture of the Other is often exoticized and reduced to neutral objects for one to respect and appreciate” (Kubota, 2004, p. 35). An important point that the author neglects is that it is not only the Other's culture that becomes essentialized, but also the culture of the dominant society (Kumaravadivelu, 2008). While Kubota discusses the state of multiculturalism and cultural teaching in an American setting, it is also important to note the contentious issue of culture in the international realm. In this scenario, the problem becomes the depthless representation of the target language's culture, often depicted in positive, essentialized terms (Kumaravadivelu, 2008).

Perhaps the most pertinent argument that is made in this particular chapter is that TESOL professionals should promote the critical adaptation of Standard English in the classroom. Kubota (2004) presents the idea that critical pedagogy in TESOL should allow English language learners (ELLs) to adapt Standard English critically to “find oppositional views and voices that could broaden possibilities for thinking and communicating” (p. 46). This viewpoint underlines the necessity of a critical awareness not only of cultural representations, but also of linguistic representations, particularly that of Standard English and the cult of the native speaker (Kubota, 2004). Kubota argues that to subvert these discourses, teachers and students alike must first establish their critical voice by using the rhetoric of the powerful.
Section Two: “Challenging Identities”

Suresh Canagarajah, in the next section of the anthology entitled “Challenging Identities,” also explores subversion, but rather than looking at it through the scope of critical multiculturalism, he examines it through identity politics. In the chapter, “Subversive identities, pedagogical safe houses, and critical learning,” Canagarajah (2004) illustrates how identity can be performed to subvert and critique institutionalized norms in education. He describes schools as “power-laden sites” that simultaneously subjugate and alienate students (2004, p. 120). This is particularly true of ESL students in the United States, where the author's study is located. Canagarajah evokes Pratt's (1991) notion of safe houses to describe the way in which ELL hybridized identities to cope with educational system, and describes safe houses as “social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings and temporary protection from legacies of oppression” (Canagarajah, 2004, p. 120-1). Whereas Pratt (1991) used the idea of a safe house to describe subaltern identity in postcolonial societies, Canagarajah (2004) uses it to describe ELLs positioned within an educational system that stereotypes and marginalizes new immigrant students. Canagarajah (2004) argues that the American educational system does not tend to nourish student agency in identity creation; subsequently, students hybridize their identities. The students inact a subversive, playful identity in the safe house and a performative identity in the school. In the safe house the students have the freedom to question their instructors and assignments, a freedom that they do not feel they have within the classroom. In school, the students act, or perform, as good students (Canagarajah, 2004). Through this hybridization, Canagarajah argues, “we
can say that the students are on top of the situation” (2004, p. 131). However, national educational statistics seem to indicate otherwise. In 2008, the United States Department of Education published that 18.3% of Hispanic students did not finish high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). That is almost four times the rate of white students for the same year (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). It would seem that despite the potential for safe houses to assist students in the creation of an identity that empowers, students still fail the system, or rather the system fails the students. Canagarajah (2004) admits that hybridity does nothing to disrupt social norms or equalize the institution of education. Obviously, subversive, hybridic student identities are not enough to empower students; so, what can we do as educators to empower our students and allow the critical in the classroom?

Sue Starfield offers one possible solution. In “‘Why does this feel empowering?: Thesis writing, concordancing, and the corporatizing university,” Starfield seeks to recontextualize empowerment. Recently, the term empowerment has gained negative connotations; as Starfield (2004) elaborates, “socially powerful, radical teacher-educators (frequently male) conceived of themselves as 'liberating' the oppressed students through the transmission of power – conceived of as property – to their up-until-then disempowered students” (2004, p. 140). The author argues that through strategic competence and technology, the notion of empowerment can be recreated, or recontextualized, to break down power structures between student and teacher, rather than sustain them (Starfield, 2004). While working with international PhD candidates at a university in Australia, Starfield discovered the usefulness of corpus-based linguistics and concordancing not only to assist students in developing academic discourse, but also
in critically examining the discourse itself. At the heart of language learning is language. The most obvious avenue of implementing the critical into EFL/ESL contexts is to examine the language itself. Although not all educational institutions may have access to the technological systems described in this chapter, it would be relatively easy to adapt its basic methods to a low-tech scenario; in essence, Starfield (2004) discusses the usefulness of deconstructing texts in the language classroom. Deconstruction not only illuminates important linguistic structures that make text more fluent (such as lexical bundles), but also facilitates a critical analysis of the text.

Section Three: “Researching Critical Practices”

In contrast to Starfield's chapter, “The logic of nonstandard teaching: A course in Cape Verdean language, culture and history” does not describe an explicit methodology that is necessarily applicable for all teaching contexts. This is the first chapter in the section titled, “Researching Critical Practices,” containing articles that seek to inform pedagogical practice through research. Brito, Lima and Auebach (2004) argue that the relationship between history, politics, and language should inform teaching methodologies and these methodologies should be co-constructed between the teacher, students, and community. They describe this as an emergent curriculum through classroom democracy (Brito et al. 2004). The research into the utopian classroom occurred in an equally ideal context. Although the research was conducted in the United States, all of the ELLs and the teacher spoke the same native language (Cape Verdean) and the learners were the highest achieving students in the school (Brito et al., 2006). The characteristics of the participants and the environment certainly aided in the ease of democratic discourse, and the co-construction of curriculum. While this study took place
in an American context, it certainly does not represent the majority of ESL classrooms (Wright, 2010).

Norton and Vanderheyden (2004), in the chapter “Comic book culture and second language learners,” provided a much more useful base for the creation of pedagogical strategies for implementing the critical, especially for younger learners. The benefits for utilizing comic books in the language classroom are threefold: empirical evidence suggests that comic books aid in the ease of language acquisition because the visual nature of the texts diminishes the language load while increasing its comprehensibility; in an ESL context it facilitates the acceptance of ELLs to their native-English peers by building a common ground for interaction and in doing so it also elevates ELLs academic and cultural competence; and lastly, it allows critical pedagogy to incorporate popular culture into its discourse (Norton and Vanderheyden, 2004). The adoption of a critical stance toward popular culture is particularly important. The majority of articles in this anthology are situated within academic discourse; subsequently, it does not necessarily discuss how ELLs can use critical strategies in their everyday lives. Benesch (2006) argues, “ELLs are engaged, to varying degrees, in the 'dynamic of public life' of the societies in which they are studying, living, and sometimes working. They therefore need to 'develop a critical response or framework' to be able to 'defend and advance their own interests’” (p. 50). This leads to the assertion that critical media awareness is imperative to the language curriculum. While Benesch (2006) forms her argument on the critique of the news media, I contend that critical awareness of popular culture is also a crucial skill for ELLs to acquire. It not only allows for the acquisition of metalinguistic strategies for deconstructing popular representations of society and culture, but also provides, as stated
above, commonalities that guide the creation of community between native and non-native English speakers.

**Section Four: “Educating Teachers for Change”**

The final section of the anthology discusses the ways in which the critical can be incorporated into teacher education. In the article “Negotiating expertise in an action research community,” Toohey and Waterstone (2004) attempt to transform classroom teachers from being “knowledge consumers” to “knowledge creators” through action research (p. 292). The goal of the exercise was, through aid from graduate students and university professors, to have ESL teachers write a publishable article based on their own research (Toohey & Waterstone, 2004). The crux of this project was academic language; the teachers did not feel that they had ownership of the necessary language needed to produce a publishable work, because academic discourse does not “come from [their] heart[s]” (Toohey & Waterstone, 2004, p. 299). This article underscores the same discourse issue illuminated throughout the volume. Academic language is a language of power. While it may not be easy to master or come from our hearts, its use can be scaffolded for our own purposes (Starfield, 2004), even if those purposes are to subvert the very system we are engaging in (Kubota, 2004).

The volume concludes without closure; it does not elucidate clear pedagogical implications, nor does it synthesize the information presented. It is not a how-to of the critical and it, at times, presents more problems than solutions. *Critical Pedagogies and Language Learning* is appropriately ended by a chapter by Alastair Pennycook entitled, “Critical moments in a TESOL praxicum.” In this chapter Pennycook exemplifies the
truly daunting concept of the critical through a narrative reflection. Just as Luke (2004) pondered about the meaning of the critical, Pennycook walks the reader through a labyrinth of possibilities to critical pedagogy, pointing out the many weakness, and some strengths, of each critical construct. He notes that the most promising projection of the critical is the problematization of practice, or the act of questioning the categories we use to understand (Pennycook, 2004). While the benefit of this task lies within seeking multiple discourses and multiple representations, it also has the potential to drag its practitioner down the dreaded “vortex of relativity;” however risky the venture, Pennycook argues that

[at] the very least, viewing the critical in terms of problematizing practices gives us a way of working in language education that doesn't reduce critical work either to the domain of critical thinking or to crude dialectics between micro and macro relations and, at the same time, keeps questions of language, discourse, power, and identity to the fore. (Pennycook, 2004, p. 330)

Much of the critical in this anthology addresses these ideas, particularly in terms of the language used for critical discourses within academia; each author realizes the problem of deconstructing power through the language of the powerful. Some of the authors explain that it is necessary to subvert from within, other call for the diversification of discourse to represent epistemologies outside of the West.

As Pennycook (2004) aptly identifies, the most critical use of the critical is often overlooked. Although it is alluded to throughout *Critical Pedagogies and Language Learning*, Pennycook (2004) is the only author to explicitly state the most practical
application of the critical through the critical moment. The critical moment is actualized through awareness, particularly through the realization that things (culture, language, reality, etc) are not as simple or straightforward as they may seem. This is the moment in which the paradigm shifts and we can see the world in a new light. This is perhaps the most practical application of the critical, and the one that can contain the most purpose in pedagogy.

Conclusion

The negotiation of critical pedagogy remains crucial to language learning, especially for TESOL. Situated within a historical framework of imperialism, and a current framework of globalization, TESOL professionals cannot ignore the ideological load of teaching English as a second or foreign language. To gain a more radically oriented view of critical pedagogies, one can examine the work of editor Julian Edge (2006) through the volume, (re)locating TESOL in an age of empire. This text looks at the critical through teaching English in a post-9/11 world. Additionally, Kumaravadivelu (2008), in Cultural Globalization and Language Education, not only provides a historical overview demonstrating the necessity of the critical position, but also a very reasonable solution introducing cultural and identity in the language classroom. The amalgamation of knowledge presented in these texts, as well as in Critical Pedagogies and Language Learning, provides a thoughtful catalyst for the TESOL/TEFL graduate student who is curious about more than linguistic structures of teaching English.
References


