

Research note

In-service Teacher Educators and the Developing of Critical Teaching: Cultural Plurality – ‘Race’ and Ethnicity in ELT Education in Brazil

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Contextualization

The main goal of this research is to develop a systematic investigation arising from some questions and concerns that confronted me as an EFL teacher and teacher educator. My main intention is to find out what EFL teachers in Brazil understand by “being critical” and whether they use “critical pedagogy” when teaching. These matters articulated themselves to me in a way that forced me to consider the need to discover the place of “critical teaching” in elementary education. There is not much new research concerning teaching EFL in Brazil, since the introduction of new National Curriculum Parameters (NCP) in 1998. The NCP identified several themes that should permeate all teaching in Brazil and I will concentrate on one particularly relevant to the curriculum of EFL that is Cultural Plurality. Inside this theme one the concept of ‘race’ and ethnicity and it is these I shall concentrate on in particular. My choice of research is related to my own ‘race’/ethnicity African-Brazilian.

Introduction

My research is at an early stage. So far I have undertaken an extensive literature review, attended research training seminars, and worked at clarifying my research focus. My research strategy will include talking to EFL teachers in-service and students of elementary school in years 7 and 8, who will become my main informants in my case study of two schools. The study draws on two assumptions. The first assumption is that teacher education cannot be separated from society, because inside society there are schools, which contain different ‘races’/ethnic groups. So ‘race’/ethnicity is present in the relationship between students and educators and among educators themselves. Hence, teachers’ work needs to be thought about “critically” in terms of ways of working. For instance, how does teaching affect students’ understanding of ‘race’/ethnicity? The issue of ‘race’/ethnicity, as Kampol (1994) suggests,

...can be affected if teachers investigate multiple forms of knowledge as related to ‘race’/ethnicity with the intent to modify and/or change curricular usage to raise levels of understanding among pupils of alienation, subordination, and oppression of others (p 53).

The second assumption is that educators build their profile as educators, inevitably, according to their experiences. Teachers’ profiles include educational experiences before their formal teacher education and in the teacher education (development) courses undertaken during training.

I believe that reflecting on cultural plurality may lead teachers to rethink their role in the state schools. I argue that “critical pedagogy” and teacher education need to be integrated within the discussion about cultural plurality so that in-service teachers are better prepared. One goal will be to help teachers provide educational experiences which enable children to envisage living in a more equal society. This view of teaching and learning is discussed by Moore (2000) and is not simply a matter of covering curriculum content, but also teaching students ‘to learn how

to learn' in order that 'they may develop as interested, enquiring, independent thinkers and doers' (p 159).

Finally, this study begins from the assumption that it is a desirable direction for teacher education to require trainees to reflect "critically" about their role as teachers in state schools (Bartlett, 1990). My goal is mainly concerned to widen the educational context in which English as a foreign language is taught. EFL classrooms are to be seen as places to discuss issues that are relevant to contemporary Brazilian society.

The conceptual field

The literature review identifies the major concepts underpinning the relationship between English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and English as an international language, together with a consideration of the ideological role of EFL. It also provides an overview of EFL and "cultural imperialism" in Brazil, as a means to understand a justification for teaching English language "critically". This discussion inevitably also links to a wider field of citizenship education. The literature cited includes: Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1994; Osler and Starkey, 1996, 2000; Canagarajah, 1999; Moore, 2000; Lambert and Machon, 2001.

Concerning teacher education in Brazil, my review discusses teacher education development in ELT in an historical overview, some changes needed to provide an efficient programme of teacher education development, and analysis of some of same current problems and issues (Bartlett, 1990; Widdowson, 1990; Nunan, 1992; Almeida Filho, 1996; Oliveira e Paiva, 2000; Celani, 2000; Furlong, 2000). Thus I consider how teaching development can, theoretically, counter a cultural hegemony in which the schools, teachers and students are located. In order to acquire a "critical pedagogy", this discussion indicates the desirability of teacher education to be designed for teachers to reflect "critically" about their role as a teacher in state schools. This means according to Apple (1996) "professionals become aware of the socio-educational context, as well as able to reflect about their own practice and not allow subordination by dominant groups" (p 14). It is argued here that teachers need to be aware of wider educational goals, in which the English as a Foreign Language classroom is seen as a place to discuss issues that are relevant to Brazilian society.

The literature review also presents an overview of "critical pedagogy" in order to understand in more detail the need for "critical teaching" and EFL, and what it implies (Freire, 1996; Giroux, 1988,1997; Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1998; Kampol, 1994; Wallace, 2002; Young, 1998; Shor, 1992). This considers how EFL teachers can, through their education, become critical and adopt critical teaching strategies. This in turn raises questions of how teacher education is constructed. Whilst this preliminary study cannot provide answers, it does provide some questions, which can be addressed through my theoretical readings and fieldwork. The fundamental motives are to identify the concept of critical teaching, and identify the degree of resonance that exists between the rationale argued here and the practice in my case study of two schools.

The research questions and research methods

Research questions:

- What does "critical pedagogy" mean for teachers of EFL in Paraná, Brazil?
- What are teachers' expectations and beliefs about teaching in a "critical" way?
- How "critical" are teachers when teaching EFL?

- What are the experiences of pupils in EFL?
- What kinds of resources do teachers use inside classrooms concerning 'race'/ethnicity?
- In what ways are these resources used critically?
- What learning outcomes can be established in relation to these resources/teaching strategies?

The methodology that was chosen to shape this research is in essence a comparison of two qualitative case studies. This I believe is appropriate because one of my main interests is to understand how EFL teachers articulate what they learned at university concerning "critical teaching" related to 'race'/ethnicity. I hope also to be able to show how teachers' thinking develops. Thus, I am not interested in the results in terms of quantity, but how teachers in service work in their natural settings.

The next stage

The next stage will be the data gathering. I will start a pilot with questionnaire and interviews, and after refining the research instruments, I will gather data using the following:

- Questionnaires;
- Interviews;
- Workshop on material production;
- Classroom observation.

If you have comments, please e-mail me at: ferreiracida@hotmail.com

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